Summarising and paraphrasing

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Summarising and paraphrasing

At university it is really important that you can summarise and paraphrase information. First, what do these two words mean?

When you summarise something you essentially state the same ideas only in fewer words. It is OK to use some, but not too many, of the original words in a summary. A summary must be shorter than the original or it isn’t a summary.

When you paraphrase something you express the same ideas but in different words. A paraphrase is usually, but not necessarily shorter than the original. In assignments paraphrasing is a good way to avoid quoting too much. Using paraphrases is usually better than using a lot of quotes because the fact that you have been able to put the same ideas into different words and still mean the same thing shows that you have understood the original source. Don’t forget that, even though you have changed the words, you still need to cite the original source in your assignment.

Remember: summary = main ideas but shorter
paraphrase = same ideas, different words

Both summarising and paraphrasing are skills which show that you have understood something. A summary shows that you have picked out the main ideas and a paraphrase shows that you can express ideas in different words. The fact that you can do this indicates that you have understood something. A summary demonstrates at least literal comprehension while a paraphrase demonstrates interpretive comprehension. (see Some tips on reading effectively Quick Guide)

Both of these skills are also very useful in organising information for assignments.
Example summary

Here is an example of a summary. The original is from an article on social networking in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networking_service)

Original

A social networking service is an online service, platform, or site that focuses on helping people to build social networks or social relations with other people who share interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections. Most social network services are web-based and provide means for users to interact over the Internet. Examples of social networking services are e-mail, Facebook and Twitter. Social networking sites allow users to share ideas, activities, events, and interests.

Summary

Social networking services are online platforms or sites that help people with similar interests connect. Most are web-based and users interact over the internet. Some examples are e-mail, Facebook and Twitter.

The summary has picked out the main ideas but reduced the number of words from 72 to 31. If you look at what has been left in and what has been left out you will see that the main content words are still there (social networking, online, internet). Some details like share ideas, activities, events, and interests have been condensed into one word, interact. A lot of the supporting words have also been left out. For example focuses on helping has been reduced to help and the sentence most social network services are web-based and provide means for users to interact over the internet has been reduced to most are web-based and users interact over the internet. This has saved seven words.

Example paraphrase

Original

A social networking service is an online service, platform, or site that focuses on helping people to build social networks or social relations with other people who share interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections. Most social network services are web-based and provide means for users to interact over the Internet. Examples of social networking services are e-mail, Facebook and Twitter. Social networking sites allow users to share ideas, activities, events, and interests.
Paraphrase

Using social networking services, people with similar interests can connect with each other online through services such as e-mail, Facebook and Twitter.

The paraphrase has condensed three sentences into one and has reduced the words from 72 to 22. The main idea has been kept through words like social networking, people with similar interests, connect and online but most of the rest of the information has been left out.

A final reminder: Where you can use paraphrases instead of quotes. They make your work look more original and show that you have put in some effort. Putting together a string of quotes doesn't show either originality or much effort. Finally, make sure you reference the source of any material you paraphrase in your assignment. You should do this with both an in-text citation and a full reference in your reference list.

Related Quick Guide

Some tips on reading effectively