Writing Right

Introduction to Academic Writing:

Make Your Point & Make It Yours

CONTENTS

Good writing is clear thinking made visible.
– Bill Wheeler

MAKE YOUR POINT: Writing Clearly

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- *Define* clarity in writing
- *List* and *describe* at least four techniques for achieving clear writing
- *Rewrite* sentences for greater clarity, in an academic context

Why Does Clarity Matter?

After all the work you put into crafting your argument, the worst thing that could happen would be for other people to not understand it. That's where *clarity* comes in. Keep in mind that university writing is all about the exchange and discussion of advanced ideas, and you can't effectively discuss what you don't understand.

In order to ease and facilitate communication, academic writing thus aims to be as logical and understandable as possible. Remember:

Clear writing is simple, logical, comprehensible writing.

You want to be able to demonstrate clear thought in your essays, so that you can prove that you understand the material you've been studying and respond intelligently to it. That's why your writing needs to be as specific and precise as possible: the simpler your writing, the more your ideas can shine.

This might seem to go against your experience. Many students — and let's face it, some published writers — seem to be under the mistaken impression that academic writing is all about convoluted sentences, mountains of jargon, and head-scratchingly obscure passages. But nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, the more complicated, messy, and confusing your writing is, the more your examiners will suspect that you're just trying to cover up the fact that you actually have nothing intelligent to say. Sometimes you do need to use the specialised vocabulary particular to your discipline, but be sure that you use it in a manner that doesn't interfere with what you want to communicate.

To sum up, always remember and apply these words of Albert Einstein: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

How to Write Clearly

Good writers use a variety of techniques to ensure clarity in their writing. Let's look at a few of them.

a) Plan First, Then Write

Do you ever step into an exam hall and panic when you see everybody else start writing furiously the moment they see the questions?

Well, panic no more. Because it is far more important to know what you're going to say before you actually say it.

Chart the flow of your ideas before you even start writing. Draw up a flowchart or scribble a list on a sheet of paper to help you organise your thoughts. Once you can visually see the flow of your ideas taking shape, it becomes a lot easier to turn those ideas into an essay that flows logically and elegantly.

Plan what you're going to say in each and every paragraph. Each paragraph should focus clearly on just *one* idea, expressed in your *topic sentence* (the very first sentence in each paragraph to indicate the main idea). Make sure you know exactly what you want to communicate, because if you don't know, neither will your reader.

b) Move from General to Specific

Clear writing seeks to convince, not to confuse. One way to achieve this is to always present the reader with general contextual information before you move on to specific details. Consider the following example:

> St Andrew's Cathedral, the National Gallery, and the Old Parliament House — along with South Beach, Cathay Building, and Tan Chin Tuan Mansion — all represent efforts to conserve heritage buildings in Singapore. The former try to preserve heritage buildings in their entirety, while the latter more controversially seek to integrate such structures into more modern developments.

The passage above remains comprehensible, but it is not very clear. That's because the author starts with a bunch of unfamiliar details ("St Andrew's Cathedral, the National Gallery, and the Old Parliament House") before finally giving the reader a familiar context ("efforts to conserve heritage buildings in Singapore"). In this way, the writing style makes it more difficult for the reader to understand what is going on.
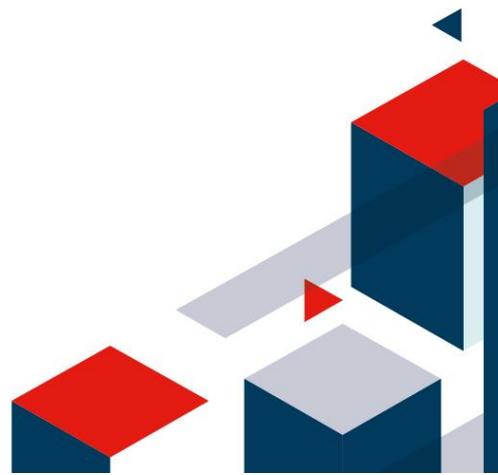
In contrast, the passage below presents the same information by moving from general to specific:

> Over the years there has been increasing efforts to conserve heritage buildings in Singapore, and such attempts have resulted in a wide variety of solutions. One successful approach has been to preserve buildings in their entirety, such as with St Andrew's Cathedral, the National Gallery, and the Old Parliament House. Another more controversial approach has been to attempt to integrate heritage buildings into more modern developments; South Beach, Cathay Building and Tan Chin Tuan Mansion all fall into this category.

This passage gives the general context ("efforts to conserve heritage buildings in Singapore") at the very outset, so that the reader instantly knows what the passage is going to be about. Note how the sentences themselves also move from general to specific detail (overall conservation efforts -> specific approaches -> specific examples).

c) Simplify Your Vocabulary

Here in university you're not graded based on how flowery your writing is. You don't get points for variety. You get them for *precision*.

Don't use complicated words when simple ones will do, and try to limit your use of jargon and specialised technical vocabulary unless you absolutely have to. (And if you do use such words, make sure you use them right!)

d) Read Your Work Aloud

The power of the human voice is often overlooked, especially in an environment so focused on the written word. However, in the history of human communication speech evolved long before writing, and speech remains one of the best arbiters of clarity available to us.

> **PRO TIP:** If you want to make your writing as comprehensible as possible, make it *speakable*.

Always read your work aloud once you're done writing (you can whisper under your breath, or better yet get a friend to read your work back to you). Reading aloud will tell you where to insert pauses and break up sentences, so that the rhythm of your writing comes closer to the natural rhythms of human speech. And the closer your writing gets to human speech, the clearer and more understandable it becomes.

Reading aloud can also show you where the complicated bits are, and where you should slow down and explain yourself a bit more. This is invaluable for clarity.

Read your work aloud.
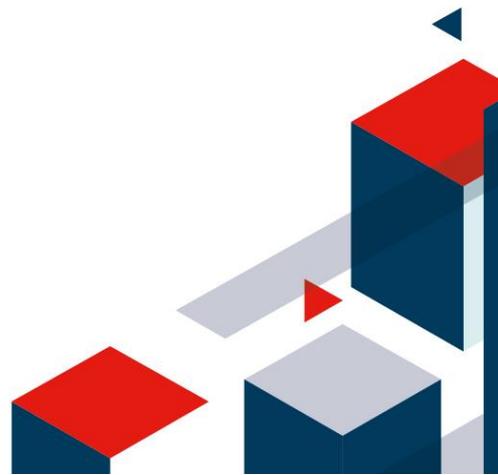
Exercises

Select the *best* definition of clear writing in a university context:

 A) Intelligent, complex, insightful writing
 B) Simple, logical, comprehensible writing
 C) Brilliant, allusive, thought-provoking writing
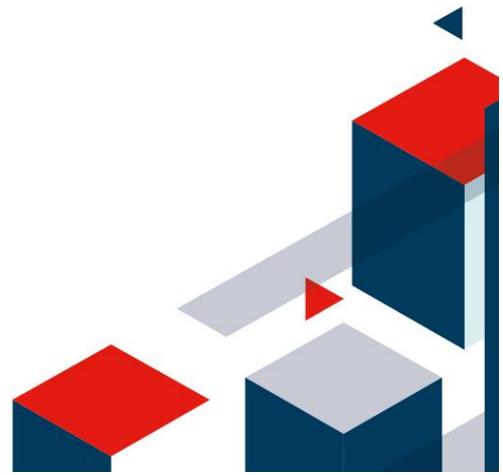 D) Convoluted, obscure, jargon-laden writing

Fill in the blanks:

List four techniques for achieving clear writing.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

Editing Exercise:

Take a look at one of your most recent essays or other pieces of writing. Try rewriting a paragraph from it, using the four strategies you have listed above to improve the clarity of your writing.

Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But since no one was listening, everything must be said again.
– André Gide

MAKE IT YOURS: Paraphrasing Your Sources

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- *Explain* why paraphrasing matters
- *Differentiate* between paraphrasing and quotation
- *Explain* why unattributed quotation is particularly unacceptable
- *List* and *describe* at least three techniques for effective paraphrasing
- *Use* at least three techniques for effective paraphrasing

Why Paraphrase?

Let's start with a simple definition of what paraphrasing is:

> *Paraphrasing is the art of expressing someone else's ideas in your own words.*

That's all there is to it. Ultimately, university life is all about working with ideas, and the ideas themselves matter more than the specific words used to describe them.

Recasting the ideas you encounter in your own words frees you from the need to stick slavishly to somebody else's awkward phrasing. Paraphrasing allows you to blend material from others neatly into your sentences, emphasising key words and presenting their ideas in your own way. It also gives you the flexibility to adapt and quote as needed for purposes of making your own arguments. On top of that, paraphrasing allows you to demonstrate your clear understanding of the material you've studied.
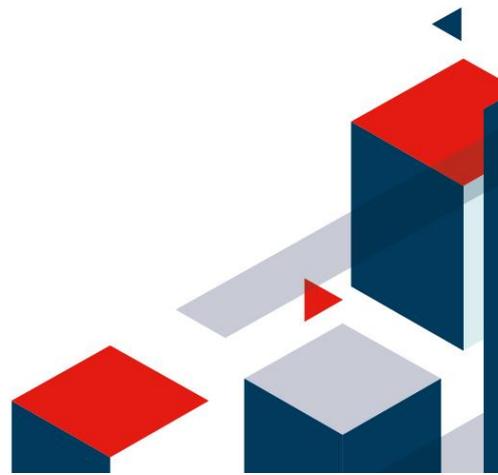
Paraphrasing Versus Quotation

I hate quotation. Tell me what you know.
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Long quotes from other authors are generally discouraged in academic writing. After all, it's *your* essay. It ought to be made up of your own words, ideas, and expressions. Hence, unless there's something particularly special about another author's use of language (perhaps it was especially succinct, which is the case with the various quotations included in this resource), there isn't any real need to quote from other authors beyond a word or a short phrase here and there.

No matter what you do, make sure you always give credit where credit is due in the form of proper attribution and referencing. Quoting another author's work without giving them due credit is called *plagiarism*. It's stealing, which is the worst possible sin you could commit at university level.

Paraphrasing Techniques

Now you know that you need to paraphrase. However, some students try to game the system by running someone else's words through online paraphrasing tools. This is a very dumb move, because these online tools frequently churn out unreadable nonsense. Remember: clear writing should be simple, logical, and understandable. Examiners have seen enough student papers to know when you're hiding something.

Of course you should do your best to change words from the original where necessary, but what else can you do? Here are some possible techniques:

a) Quote Only the Key Words

Sometimes a sentence is so long and chunky that it doesn't make sense to paraphrase the whole thing. To make your essay flow more smoothly, try quoting only the key words and filling in the space by yourself.

Take for example the following sentence:

> *Although the idea of businesses giving back to society is on the surface laudable, the reality is that the majority of firms today use corporate social responsibility (CSR) only as a form of corporate window-dressing, deploying it as a means to enhance their public image by presenting themselves as good corporate citizens while not actually concerning themselves much with ethical issues and standards.*

That's a pretty long sentence.
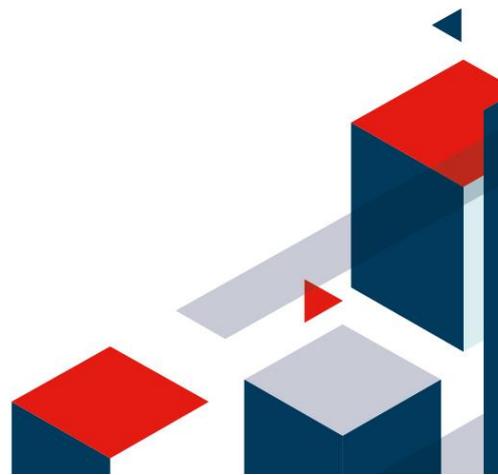
Let's take just a couple of choice quotes and rewrite the rest:

> *Many businesses treat CSR merely as "a form of corporate window-dressing", a way to make themselves look like "good corporate citizens" without actually caring much about giving back to society.*

This technique makes your life a lot easier, especially when it comes to long sentences. It allows you to skip right to the important stuff without needing to paraphrase *everything* the author says. This enables you to make your point with fewer words and with greatly reduced effort.

b) Change the Focus

The main focus (or *subject*) of a sentence generally appears at its beginning. Examine the following sentence for example:

> *Millions of commuters were left stranded during rush hour after train services were disrupted by an unexpected software error.*

In this typical "human-interest" sentence, the focus is placed on the people ("millions of commuters") who had their lives disrupted. Such sentences can frequently be found in news reports.

However, what if you were writing an essay about the role of computers in our lives? You might want to make use of the same information, but place the focus on IT problems instead.

To do this, you could paraphrase the sentence as follows:

> *Serious IT issues caused train services to fail at the busiest period of the day, leading to widespread transportation delays.*

Notice how the focus of the sentence has now been placed on IT issues instead. You accomplish this by putting IT issues at the start of the sentence, making them your subject.
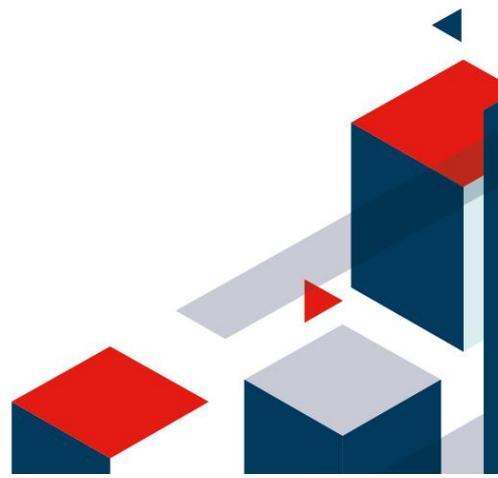
c) Mention Your Source First

One easy way to refer to something someone else has said is to mention your source at the very beginning of your sentence. Consider the following quote:

> "It was clear to us from an early stage that some sort of lockdown was going to be needed." – *Farid Ghazali, spokesperson, Ministry of Health*

To paraphrase this, let's put the Ministry spokesperson at the start of the sentence:

> A spokesperson from the Ministry of Health noted that a lockdown had seemed inevitable from very early on in the pandemic.

This is an excellent way to save yourself from charges of plagiarism, especially if you are quoting from books or articles. Take the following for example:

> Hardly any students nowadays see education in terms of their own intellectual and moral development. Instead, there has been a marked tendency for them to treat education in purely utilitarian terms, with diplomas and degrees thought of as mere stepping stones to economic advancement. – J. Haldar and K. Ibarra, *Modern Education* (2020)

Once again, let's start by placing the source at the beginning of the sentence:

> Haldar and Ibarra (2020) point out that students frequently see education only as a way to earn more money in the future, instead of viewing it as a path towards their own intellectual growth.

As a bonus, placing your source at the start also gives you an opportunity to demonstrate your referencing skills. Once again, that's good academic style.
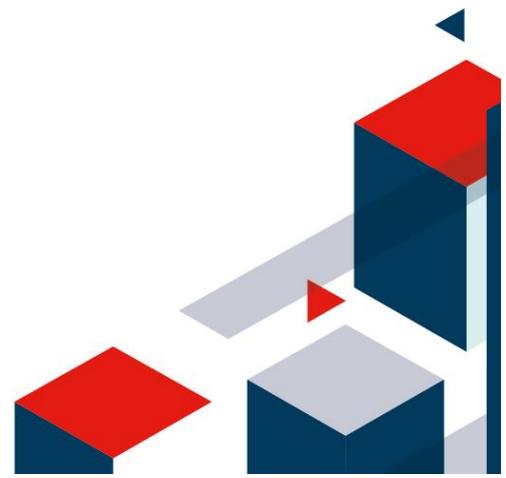
Exercises

Tick all the correct answers:

Paraphrasing is important because it allows you…

    A) to present the work of others in your own way.
    B) to deploy your sources cleverly when constructing your own arguments.
    C) to demonstrate that you understand the material well.
    D) to avoid coming up with original ideas.

In academic writing, when is it okay to copy another author's work without giving them credit?

    A) When you can't find the original source of the material.
    B) When the source is so obscure that no one will ever notice.
    C) When you're in a rush and need to meet a deadline.
    D) Never.

Fill in the blanks:

What's the difference between *paraphrasing* and *quotation*?

Paraphrasing is _____

Quotation is _____

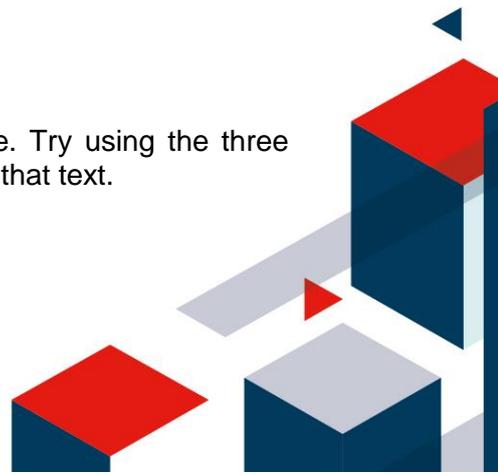List three techniques for effective paraphrasing:

    1) _____

    2) _____

    3) _____

Writing Exercise:

Select a piece of writing recently given to you as part of a course. Try using the three techniques listed by you above to paraphrase some sentences from that text.

Further Resources

Strunk Jr., William, and White, E. B. (1999). The Elements of Style. *4th ed. S.I.: Longman.*

> *The Elements of Style*, known more generally as "Strunk & White", has for a long time been one of the most revered guides to clear writing in English. Originally composed more than a hundred years ago, it remains in print and is still regularly referred to today.

Truss, Lynne. (2003). Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation. *London: Profile Books.*

> A modern book on punctuation that became a popular bestseller. Improbable, but true. A highly enjoyable way to familiarise yourself with the fundamentals of English punctuation.

For more resources on Academic Writing or English Language support, you may scan the QR code below.

https://tlc.suss.edu.sg/english-support.html
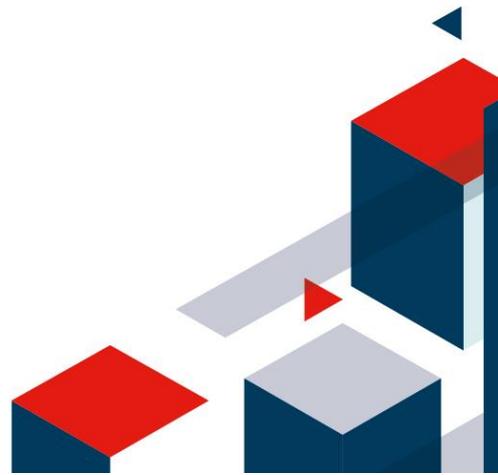
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