Summarizing and Paraphrasing

By Kristen Gay

When writing an academic paper, it is important for writers to refer to sources that can support and add credibility to their claims. Perhaps the most obvious method for integrating such sources is to quote them directly. Quoting does serve writers well in certain contexts, such as when the source's exact wording is important, or when the writer cannot state the message more concisely in his/her own words. On the other hand, quoting excessively can detract from the writer's voice and cause readers to get lost in the shuffle between quotes from various sources. Instead of solely relying on quotes to represent ideas from sources, writers can summarize and paraphrase to represent the source's ideas in their own words. Both of these methods are useful because they allow a writer to convey a source's ideas without losing her voice. For example, think of a film critic's role in reviewing a movie—the critic does not usually directly quote from the script; instead, he or she simplifies and condenses specific plot points in his or her own words and describes the overall theme of the entire work. The purpose for the review is not to retell the story—since readers can go see the movie themselves if they want to know the entire plot—but rather, to make a claim or state an opinion about certain aspects of the story as it translated into film.

When someone begins to tell a long-winded story, it is not uncommon to hear someone else (perhaps an unwilling listener) say that the storyteller does not "know how to make a long story short." What the person is asking for in such a situation is the gist or general point of the story—they do not want to hear the details or the entire sequence of events as much as they want to know the point or outcome of them. Essentially, this person's comment asks the storyteller to summarize her point. Summarizing can be very useful in writing situations when the reader only needs to know the main point or idea from a source being referenced.

Summarizing a source means that a writer captures the source's main idea and/or overall thesis, or synthesizes the writer's argument. A writer might choose to summarize a source if he or she wants to give readers a general idea of the entire source's point, meaning, or idea. For example, a writer may summarize an entire book's main theme, a general plot for a movie, or an overall argument for a speech. Summaries are not usually tied to a specific lines or pages in the text; instead, they tend to represent the work as a whole.

Summaries are most useful when writers want to convey general or overall meaning without relying on a specific passage or moment within the text. For example, imagine that I want to summarize *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling. As a summary of the entire plot of the book, I might write:

> In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, a young orphan learns that he is a wizard. Because of this new knowledge, he enters the world of wizardry, where he makes new friends, demonstrates courage, and resists dark magic.

This summary provides a broad overview of the entire book. But notice that the summary focuses on the specific points that I want to stress, as the writer. If I wanted to, I might summarize the book in terms of the theme of friendship, or magic, or something else altogether—like the use or abuse of power. Thus, summaries allow writers to take a main point from a source and tailor it to fit their context. This ensures that the summary supports or illustrates a point that the writer is making.

In other situations, you might hear or read a specific passage that is interesting but could be stated in more clear or concise terms. Or, the phrase might make sense to you—as a person with some expertise on a given topic—but it might need to be translated for a different audience who lacks such expertise. As a

writer, it is your job to consider which statements from sources might be confusing to a reader who lacks the full source's context, and to restate this information in your own words in order to clarify the point while limiting the use of jargon and reducing wordiness. Using a source in this way is an example of paraphrasing.

Paraphrasing a source means that a writer focuses on local, "smaller picture" ideas and restates them in her own words. For example, a writer may take a complex sentence in a paper and restate it more clearly. Or, a writer may take an entire paragraph from a book and restate the ideas within that section more concisely—perhaps the main idea from this short excerpt could be restated in one sentence. Paraphrasing should reference a specific section of text and should capture the main point or idea from the text; however, the wording should belong to the writer. Changing one or two words does not mean that a quote has been paraphrased. The wording should be significantly changed in order for the writer to have successfully paraphrased a given section of text.

Paraphrasing is useful in situations in which a writer wants to simplify or translate the meaning of a specific sentence or paragraph for a reader. For example, consider the following original sentence and paraphrase:

- Original sentence:

    "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 45).

- Paraphrased sentence:

    Judith Butler argues that gender does not exist as such—instead, repeated performances of "man" and "woman" create the illusion of gender (45).

Notice that the first sentence assumes a shared knowledge on the part of the reader—that they should understand what "regulatory frame" means, for example. The second sentence clarifies the original sentence's point, which means that the writer does not have to explain the unnecessary jargon from the original quote. The second sentence also makes a more pointed claim: Judith Butler argues that gender does not exist. Perhaps this claim from Butler will be useful for a point about gender stereotypes, for example, in the writer's paper. Paraphrasing allows writers to more quickly connect the source to their own claim because it offers a pointed explanation of a particularly useful section. This also enables readers to better understand how the source's information relates to the writer's argument.

Overall, summarizing and paraphrasing can be useful strategies for incorporating sources into papers and supporting your ideas as a writer. They can help the writer maintain the focus on her own voice, and they can also help readers to better understand information from sources. Perhaps the most important strategy for incorporating ideas from sources is to think carefully about whether quoting, summarizing, or paraphrasing will be the best method for integrating evidence.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble.* New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.* New York: Scholastic, 1999. Print.