



Paraphrase or Plagiarism?

Even if you never submit a paper in your name that was actually written by someone else, the most grievous form of plagiarism, you may still be guilty of plagiarism if you **paraphrase improperly**. When you embed a source's words or ideas incorrectly in your paper, you are plagiarizing, whether you meant to copy or not. And plagiarism is plagiarism, no matter your intentions.

What exactly constitutes plagiarism when putting a source's ideas into your own words?

The distinctions between proper and improper paraphrasing are clarified here.

Compare the following two paragraphs. The first is the original text from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC): *The Extinction Files*.

"The past twenty years have seen an explosion of research into the causes of mass extinctions, most of which was inspired by one man – the physicist Luis Alvarez. In 1980 (eight years before his death) he published a scientific paper suggesting that the most famous extinction (which wiped out the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous) was due to a giant asteroid crashing into Earth. This was no crackpot theory. Alvarez was a respected scientist who had received a Nobel Prize for his work, but followed from his discovery of unusually large quantities of a rare element, Iridium, in the rocks that marked the boundary between the Cretaceous and Tertiary periods. Iridium is more common in asteroids – and Alvarez argued that this was evidence for an extra-terrestrial impact." (www.bbc.uk/education/darwin/exfiles/theoryintro.html)

This second paragraph is a writer's "paraphrase" of the original:

In 1980, Luis Alvarez, published a scientific paper suggesting that the most famous extinction (the one which wiped out the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous) was due to a giant asteroid crashing into the Earth. This theory came out of Alvarez's discovery of unusually large quantities of a rare

element, iridium, in the rocks that marked the boundary between the Cretaceous and the Tertiary periods. Iridium is extremely rare in the Earth's crust, but it is more common in asteroids – and he argued that this was evidence for an extra-terrestrial impact.

What do you think?

The author of the second paragraph has copied the original: A) Words or B) Ideas. If you selected A, you are correct; if you selected B, you are incorrect. The author of the "paraphrased" paragraph has **copied the original words**. Even though the text has been rearranged somewhat, this is plagiarism because there is **no original writing**. The author removed some phrases, rearranged some sentences, and substituted a few words – "came out of" in place of "but followed from" – but did not actually **WRITE anything original**.

This is unacceptable. **This is blatant plagiarism.**

Let's continue, referring to the same original source from the BBC, read this second attempt at paraphrasing the original:

Twenty years ago, the discovery of large amounts of iridium in a thin layer of rock at the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary sparked scientific research into the causes of mass extinctions. Iridium is rare in most earth rocks, but it occurs in asteroids, so it was proposed that a large asteroid hit the Earth and led to the famous mass extinction that killed off the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous.

What do you think?

The author of the second paragraph has copied the original: A) Words or B) Ideas. If you selected A, you are incorrect; if you selected B, you are correct. In this case, the author **copied the original ideas**. This is a fairly good paraphrasing of the original text; it expresses the original's information or ideas using the writer's own words. However, it leaves out critical references to the original thinkers. Removing references to Alvarez fails to give him proper credit for impact theory. Failing

to credit the BBC-Extinction Files leaves the impression that this author analyzed the scientific literature and concluded that Alvarez's ideas sparked research into the causes of mass extinction. Anytime you **use the words or ideas of others without citation**, you are guilty of plagiarism.

So, what is the correct way to use the ideas of the original paper? Continue reading the following paragraph, a third attempt at paraphrasing the original, which contains the proper paraphrasing and citing according to CMS (Chicago Manual of Style) guidelines:

Twenty years ago, the discovery of large amounts of iridium in a thin layer of rock at the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary sparked scientific research into the causes of mass extinctions.¹ Iridium is rare in most earth rocks, but it occurs in asteroids, so it was proposed that a large asteroid hit the Earth, and led to the famous mass extinction that killed off the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous.²

Notes:

1. BBC-Extinction Files: www.bbc.co.uk/education/darwin/exfiles/theoryintro.html.

2. Alvarez, L.W., Alvarez, W., Asaro, F. Michel H. V. (1980) "Extraterrestrial Cause for the Cretaceous-Tertiary Extinction", *Science* 208, 1095-1108.

Plagiarism is Wrong

Plagiarism is wrong because it is:

- **Unethical** — Plagiarism is a type of fraud. Plagiarists pass off work they did not write as their own.
- **Illegal** — US copyright laws protect intellectual property.
- **Against all academic codes of conduct** — Section VIII, Student Rights and Discipline Policies, of Gateway Community College's Student Handbook lists plagiarizing in Section 3.2 as one type of conduct that conflicts with the College's expectation of academic integrity (see page 110). Plagiarism is a punishable offense at Gateway.

When students **plagiarize a text**, they **do not write anything new**. They simply:

- **Remove a few sentences**
- **Delete or add a few adjectives**
- **Combine sentences**
- **Rearrange sentences**
- **Reorder content**

Most importantly, plagiarism hurts students; they are robbed of the chance to learn proper researching and writing techniques, skills that Gateway graduates are expected to practice when they enter the workforce or continue their academic journeys.