How to Paraphrase

General advice

1. When reading a passage, try first to understand it as a whole, rather than pausing to write down specific ideas or phrases.

2. Be selective. Unless your assignment is to do a formal or "literal" paraphrase, you usually don't need to paraphrase an entire passage; instead, choose and summarize the material that helps you make a point in your paper.

3. Think of what "your own words" would be if you were telling someone who's unfamiliar with your subject (your mother, your brother, a friend) what the original source said.

4. Remember that you can use direct quotations of phrases from the original within your paraphrase.

Methods of Paraphrasing

A. Look away from the source; then write. Read the text you want to paraphrase several times until you feel that you understand it and can use your own words to restate it to someone else. Then, look away from the original and rewrite the text in your own words.

B. Take notes. Take abbreviated notes; set the notes aside; then paraphrase from the notes a day or so later, or when you draft.

If you find that you can't do A or B, this may mean that you don't understand the passage completely or that you need to use a more structured process until you have more experience in paraphrasing.
The method below is not only a way to create a paraphrase but also a way to understand a difficult text.

C. While looking at the source, first change the structure, then the words.

For example, consider the following passage from *Love and Toil* (a book on motherhood in London from 1870 to 1918), in which the author, Ellen Ross, puts forth one of her major arguments:

*Love and Toil* maintains that family survival was the mother's main charge among the large majority of London's population who were poor or working class; the emotional and intellectual nurture of her child or children and even their actual comfort were forced into the background. The mother was to work for and organize household subsistence. (p. 9)

Change the structure

Begin by starting at a different place in the passage and/or sentence(s), basing your choice on the focus of your paper. This will lead naturally to some changes in wording. Some places you might start in the passage above are "The mother's main charge," "Among the . . . poor or working class," "Working for and organizing household subsistence," or "The emotional and intellectual nurture." Or you could begin with one of the people the passage is about: "Mothers," "A mother," "Children," "A child." Focusing on specific people rather than abstractions will make your paraphrase more readable.

At this stage, you might also break up long sentences, combine short ones, expand phrases for clarity, or shorten them for conciseness, or you might do this in an additional step. In this process, you'll naturally eliminate some words and change others.

Here's one of the many ways you might get started with a paraphrase of the passage above by changing its structure. In this case, the focus of the paper is the effect of economic status on children at the turn of the century, so the writer begins with
Children of the poor at the turn of the century received little if any emotional or intellectual nurturing from their mothers, whose main charge was family survival. Working for and organizing household subsistence were what defined mothering. Next to this, even the children's basic comfort was forced into the background (Ross, 1995).

Now you've succeeded in changing the structure, but the passage still contains many direct quotations, so you need to go on to the second step.

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**Change the words**

Use synonyms or a phrase that expresses the same meaning.

It's important to start by changing the structure, not the words, but you might find that as you change the words, you see ways to change the structure further. The final paraphrase might look like this:

According to Ross (1993), poor children at the turn of the century received little mothering in our sense of the term. Mothering was defined by economic status, and among the poor, a mother's foremost responsibility was not to stimulate her children's minds or foster their emotional growth but to provide food and shelter to meet the basic requirements for physical survival. Given the magnitude of this task, children were deprived of even the "actual comfort" (p. 9) we expect mothers to provide today.

You may need to go through this process several times to create a satisfactory paraphrase.