If you’re a fan of the hit TV series — and now cult classic — *The Office*, you’re probably familiar with Michael Scott’s favorite punchline: “That’s what she said!” Scott would utter this phrase any time any character said something which could be perceived as having even the slightest amount of innuendo. After saying his catchphrase, he would usually turn and smile goofily into the nearest camera. Fans of the show quickly adopted the phrase, and it became so ubiquitous that no one could say, “that’s what she said,” in seriousness without bringing on a fit of laughter.

While this is a silly example, it goes to show how easy putting words into another person’s mouth can be. Simply by saying, “that’s what she said,” Scott was able to attribute a phrase to some unknown speaker. This same kind of power exists when we quote, paraphrase, or summarize in our essays. Our readers trust that we will responsibly quote or paraphrase material. While we have the power, as writers, to represent material in whatever way we’d like, we have a responsibility to represent all quoted and paraphrased material correctly. That process begins by quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing at the appropriate times. Each form of attribution has a unique purpose.

A quotation is made up of exact words from a source, which you must be careful to let your reader know were not originally your words. To indicate your reliance on exact words from a source, either place the borrowed words between quotation marks or — if the quotation is 40 words or more — use indentation to create a block quotation.

A paraphrase preserves information from a source but does not preserve its exact wording. Paraphrase when information from a source can help you explain or illustrate a point you are making, but the exact wording of the source is not crucial.
A summary is when you identify the most important ideas and concepts and restate the text (or other media) in your own words. Summary is often reserved for times when you need to condense large portions of material into only a few words or sentences.

Each of these tools is necessary for writing a well-supported argumentative essay, but it’s helpful to know when to use each form. Are you ready to learn more about including sources in your essay?

About this transcript:
- Transcript title: “That’s What She Said”
- Corresponding Lesson: LACO_055 Summarizing, Paraphrasing, and Quoting
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