What Does “In My Own Words” Mean?

When you answer unit questions, you should be composing answers in your own words. Studying the course material and then writing your own answers to unit questions requires you to understand the concepts well enough to explain them. As you’re answering these questions, you may find that there are some topics that you don’t understand as well as you thought. You should then go back to study the materials in that unit again. Feel free to ask questions as you do so, either by sending me a message or posting your question on the “Ask the Instructor” section of the Forum.

I don’t collect and grade your answers to unit questions, because they should be part of your own study process. If you have taken the time to create well-developed answers, you will be more likely to perform well on quizzes. You should also study your answers to prepare for tests, which include essay questions on similar topics.

Study readings, notes, and web resources, and then put all of these sources away while you compose your responses for unit questions, quizzes, tests, and Forum discussions. There are three major reasons for writing essay answers and Forum posts without looking at sources:

1. Students who answer essay questions while looking directly at the textbook or other sources often commit intentional or unintentional acts of academic dishonesty by using the words of other authors without proper citations. I do not recommend that you quote or paraphrase from any source for quizzes, tests, or Forum posts, but, if you do so, you must cite your sources using MLA references to avoid plagiarism. See the syllabus for penalties for academic dishonesty.
2. It is very unlikely that quoting or paraphrasing from your textbook (or any other single source) will result in an adequate answer to the question. Unit questions (like essay questions on quizzes and tests) are based on the material in the unit as a whole (readings, notes, and web resources), not on one paragraph or page from the textbook.
3. If you are quoting or paraphrasing to answer essay questions, all you’re showing is your ability to quote or paraphrase, not your own understanding of the course material.

Sample Question: Define the major qualities of the Rococo art style, and discuss how they are evident in Fragonard’s Happy Accidents of The Swing.

How Not to Answer: Exact Quotation

Fragonard is one of the finest representatives of the Rococo style, and his painting Happy Accidents of the Swing is a prime example of the aims and accomplishments of the Rococo artist. In the midst of a lush green park, whose opulent foliage was no doubt inspired by the Baroque, we are offered a glimpse of the “love games” of the leisure class. A young, though not-so-innocent, maiden, with petticoats billowing beneath her sumptuous pink dress, is being swung by an unsuspecting bishop high over the head of her reclining gentleman friend, who seems delighted with the view. The subjects’ diminutive forms and rosy cheeks make them doll-like, an image reinforced by the idyllic setting. This is
eighteenth-century life at its finest—pampered by subtle hues, embraced by lush textures, and bathed by the softest of lights. Unfortunately, this was all a mask for life at its worst. As the ruling class continued to ignore the needs of the common people, the latter were preparing to rebel.

These exact words appear on p. 409 of Understanding Art by Lois Fichner-Rathus. If you answered a unit question in this way, you wouldn't be answering the question or demonstrating that you had learned about the topic. If you submitted an essay question answer in this way on a quiz or test, you would receive no credit for your answer.

How Not to Answer: Close Paraphrase

Fragonard represents the Rococo style, and this painting is an example of the goals of Rococo artists. In a green park, we see the romantic games of the upper class. A young maiden in a fancy pink dress is being pushed by a bishop over her gentleman friend, who is pleased with his view. The small forms and pastel cheeks make them look like dolls, which is supported by the peaceful setting. This is eighteenth-century life at its best, with soft hues, leafy textures, and soft light. It is also covering up life at its worst. The ruling class was ignoring the suffering of the common people, and they were planning to rebel.

While this answer substitutes some different words, the structure of the sentences is very close to the original passage by Fichner-Rathus. If you answered a unit question in this way, you wouldn't be answering the question or demonstrating that you had learned about the topic. If you submitted an essay question answer in this way on a quiz or test, you would receive no credit for your answer.

How to Answer: In Your Own Words

The Rococo style showed the life of European nobility. It dealt with romantic subjects like love affairs, depicting them in fantasy settings with pastel colors and soft textures. Fragonard’s painting demonstrates the Rococo style because it shows a secret relationship. The bishop on the right side doesn't know that the man on the left can see up the woman's dress. The woman's dress is pink and flowing. The leaves appear soft, and the painting doesn't have any straight lines. Everything looks pastel and romantic, which is what makes it typical of the Rococo style.

This answer identifies the important features of the Rococo style, and gives specific details from the painting as support. It doesn't draw closely on any one source, so it reflects real understanding of the topic.