



READ

MOTHER TO SON

By Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.



Hughes, Langston. "Mother to Son." *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, vol. 25, no. 2, Dec. 1922, p. 87. [Note: This work is in the public domain]



ACTIVITY: Finding Meaning

Take about two minutes to answer the following questions:

What do you think is the central message of this poem? How do you know?

QUOTATIONS & PARAPHRASES

Imagine you are writing an analysis for a Humanities/English class, and you need to pull some ideas from this poem. The best way to do this is either to use a quote or a paraphrase. First, let's review quotations. Then, let's talk about paraphrases.



READ: Quotations

THE BASICS

You can borrow ideas from the poem exactly as the words appear (that's a quotation).

When you quote, remember to cite your sources using a parenthetical (or in-text) citation. In MLA, you simply include the last name of the author and the page number, where the line appears.

Example:

"Quote" (Hughes 87).

NARRATIVE QUOTATIONS

You can use a "narrative" quotation (where you name the author). We call it "narrative," because in a narrative (a story), dialogue focuses on who is speaking.

Example:

Langston Hughes writes, "Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't been no crystal stair" (87).

This quote has the following structure:

Signal Phrase	Quotation	Citation
Langston Hughes writes,	"Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't..."	(87).

You'll notice the term **Signal Phrase**. A signal phrase includes the speaker's name and a special type of verb called a reporting verb, which introduces the quote. Many different reporting verbs exist. You can use:

Says	Adds	Argues	Mentions	Insists
States	Posits	Asserts	Observes	Utters
Reveals	Suggests	Offers	Reports	Declares
Claims	Proposes	Concludes	Comments	Asks

Remember: Capitalize the first letter of the first word of the quote, place the comma after the reporting verb and before the quotation, and put a period after the citation.



READ: Quotations

INVERTED QUOTATIONS

To spice things up in your writing, you can invert the quotation as well (putting the quote before the signal phrase).

Example:

"Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had tacks in it," wrote Langston Hughes (87).

This quote has the following structure:

Quotation	Signal Phrase	Citation
"Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't..."	wrote Langston Hughes	(87).

CONTEXTUAL QUOTATIONS

You can even use a different form of quotation, called a Contextual Quotation, where you provide context with the quote (that is, information about the source, where you name the source of the material, instead of the author).

Example:

In the newsletter, *The Crisis*, a poet wrote, "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had tacks in it" (Hughes 87).

BLOCK QUOTATIONS

If you decide to use larger portions of the poem, try a "block" quotation. (According to MLA guidelines, use this form for quotations over 40 words or longer than four lines.)

Example:

In the close of "Mother To Son," the author concludes:

Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (Hughes 87)

In this section of the poem, the mother encourages the young boy to succeed despite any difficulties in life.

This quote has the following structure and some special formatting:

Signal Phrase	Use a colon after the signal phrase.
Quotation	Do not use quotation marks and indent the whole quote.
Citation	Put the period before the citation for block quotes.
Commentary/Synopsis	Write a short comment after the quote (from the left margin).



READ: Paraphrases

THE BASICS

Instead of quoting, you can borrow ideas and put them into your own words. We call this paraphrasing. This practice might be more useful in certain situations, such as analyzing poems, making scientific jargon more accessible, etc.

With paraphrasing you can:

Add words	Change words	Cut/omit words	Use synonyms	Change the word order
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How Much Do I Have to Change in a Paraphrase?

Whatever you do, try to preserve the original idea (or message). Change enough in your paraphrase to make your line appear different from the quotation. Just like quotes, cite your sources using a parenthetical (or in-text) citation.

Example:

Quote	"Life for me ain't been no crystal stair" (Hughes 87).
Paraphrase	The mother in the poem writes that life has been difficult (Hughes 87).

Notice how the message in the paraphrase is similar but more easily understood.

CONSTRUCTING THE PARAPHRASE

Constructing a paraphrase is as easy as 1, 2, 3.... The process is simple:

1. Read the text carefully to make sure you understand it.
2. Identify the most important message/idea.
3. Restate the idea in your own words.
4. Cite the source.

Just like a quote, you can use a "narrative" structure and name the author/speaker/writer first. Or, you can use a "contextual" structure and name the source

Example:

Paraphrase (Narrative)	The mother states that her life has been difficult (Hughes 87).
Paraphrase (Contextual)	The main character in the poem, "Mother to Son," by Langston Hughes discusses that life is difficult (Hughes 87).

You will notice that both of these paraphrases also have signal phrases (and reporting verbs), much like quotations.



READ: Paraphrases

TRANSLATE, INTERPRET, AND CLARIFY IDEAS

When you paraphrase, you are almost working as if you are a translator (converting ideas into easily understood forms). Some ideas are easy to put into our own words. Others may require more creativity.

Examples:

Quote	"I'se still climbin'."
Paraphrase	The protagonist in the poem is still attempting to move forward in life (Hughes 87).

Quote	"Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."
Paraphrase	The speaker in "Mother to Son" recalls how life is difficult and not luxurious by any means (Hughes 87).

PRO TIP: ADD MORE CONTEXT

One thing you can do to lengthen your writing, especially around the paraphrase, is to provide additional context, referring to the setting of an idea, a statement, etc.

Sometimes, you can even add information about the author or speaker, such as their credentials or background.

Example:

Langston Hughes, the legendary poet of the Harlem Renaissance, suggests that we should continue forward despite any struggles (87).

PRO TIP: ADD COMMENTARY

You can often add additional comments. You can explain:

- Your thoughts on this idea or the statement.
- Why is this idea/information significant?

Example:

Langston Hughes, the legendary poet of the Harlem Renaissance, suggests that we should continue forward with something despite any struggles (87). Further, this message echoes the resilience and the "can do" attitude found among Black Americans in 1920s of New York.



ACTIVITY: Creating Paraphrases

Directions: Convert the following quotes into paraphrases. Make sure to include the in-text (or parenthetical) citation. Consider writing the paraphrase with added context or commentary.

Quote: "Kindness is a language the deaf can hear and the blind can see."

Author: Christian Bovee

Page Number: 109

Source: Bovee, Christian Nestle. *Thoughts, Feelings, and Fancies*. Wiley & Halsted, 1857

Quote: "A mother's arms are made of tenderness and sweet sleep blesses the child who lies within."

Author: Victor Hugo

Page Number: 141

Source: Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. J.M. Dent & E.P. Dutton, London, 1909.

Quote: "Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly."

Author: Robert F. Kennedy

Page Number: 2

Source: Kennedy, Robert Fitzgerald. "Day of Affirmation Address." University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, 4 Apr. 1968.