Put It In Your Own Words: The Talk Aloud Method of Paraphrasing

Stan wants to start his paper on technology with a definition of it. But when he starts to do this he realizes he isn't exactly sure how to technically define it so he Googles it. Wikipedia gives him this:

“Technology is the usage and knowledge of tools, techniques, crafts, system or methods of organization.”

He begins his paper with this sentence:

Technology, by definition, is the usage and knowledge of tools, techniques, crafts, systems or methods of organizations. This usage, though being taken advantage of by society, People forget that technology’s role is “to be used” and are allowing technology to “use” them.

Stan did put “by definition” into the sentence, but it is clearly lifted from Wikipedia. He did not cite it as a quote or a paraphrase (probably because he has been told over and over that Wikipedia is an unacceptable source), so it is doubly problematic. This is a clear, though somewhat minor, case of plagiarism.

How could Stan have avoided plagiarism? One easy way would be to just cite the source. If he didn’t want to use Wikipedia, he could look it up in a more credible source such as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, available through the library databases) or any number of other free online dictionaries. What would be even better, though, would be to create his own definition.

Something like this, the definition of a commonly used word or concept, will usually be what is sometimes called common knowledge. Common knowledge is stuff like two hydrogens and one oxygen make water, George Washington was the first president of the United States, the moon orbits the earth. Things most people who have at least a grade school education know.

It can be difficult to tell whether something is common knowledge or not but a good rule of thumb is if you look it up and see it uncited in several different sources, then it probably is. If this is the case, one thing you can do is paraphrase these multiple sources. For instance, if I Google “define: technology”, I get these definitions:

- the practical application of science to commerce or industry
- engineering: the discipline dealing with the art or science of applying scientific knowledge to practical problems; "he had trouble deciding which branch of engineering to study"
  wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn
- Technology is the usage and knowledge of tools, techniques, and crafts, or is systems or methods of organization, or is a material product (such as clothing) of these things. ...
  en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology
- Technology is the first album of the Melodic death metal band Crimson Death. It was recorded in 2001, but due to financial problems of the record label it was released in 2004 by Mythic Metal Productions.
  en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology_(album)
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- the study of or a collection of techniques; a particular technological concept; the body of tools and other implements produced by a given society
  en.wiktionary.org/wiki/technology
- technological - based in scientific and industrial progress; "a technological civilization"
- technological - technical: of or relating to a practical subject that is organized according to scientific principles; "technical college"; "technological development"
  wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn

First, Stan should read through these and try to get a sense of what they all have in common. Also, obviously, he will need to disregard definitions that are irrelevant to the task at hand (sorry, Crimson Death). Maybe he could even jot down commonly used words. He sees “application” and “use” as well as “science”, “knowledge”, and “industry” used in almost all the definitions. Next, Stan looks away or walks away from the screen for a few minutes and tries to explain to himself what he just read and tried to understand. He imagines he is describing it to someone else. How would he explain it to a friend if it came up in a conversation? After mulling this over for awhile, he returns to the screen or the notebook and tries out his own definition. He uses some of the same key words (“application”, “science”, etc.) but the tone and way he explains it should be distinct. So maybe:

*Technology is the application of scientific knowledge to human uses.*

His definition might not be as detailed and scholarly sounding but at least it is his and furthermore it overlaps enough with those other definitions to hold up and make sense. He doesn’t need to cite it because it is common knowledge and anyone questioning his definition could look it up themselves and see that it is basically correct. In addition, putting it in his own words makes the rest of the argument he wants to make in the paper go easier since he can tailor the definition to fit the argument he wants to make. For instance, by putting “human uses” into his definition, he can go on to argue that technology can go awry and instead begin to use humans.

Stan has avoided plagiarism by synthesizing several sources of common knowledge. He won’t be marked down for using Wikipedia, he will appear 20% smarter to his instructor, and he has done his daily duty of learning to think for himself.