

Effective Paraphrasing

Expect paraphrasing to be more difficult than quoting! It's challenging because when we paraphrase, we have to completely change the wording and the sentence/paragraph structure into our own, and yet at the same time convey the identical meaning of the original.

We might ask, why do we have to paraphrase at all? Why not just quote everything we borrow? But imagine what would happen if we drew from five different sources on a particular page. If we just quoted those five different sources rather than paraphrasing some of them into our own way of writing, the page would sound like an awkward patchwork of many different voices. By paraphrasing most of what we borrow, we make the writing sound unified: our unique voice dominates and shines through.

There is another good reason to paraphrase: paraphrasing forces us to really understand the original-- if we just quote it, we don't have to wrestle with it and make it our own the way we do when we paraphrase!

How do we paraphrase? A good method is to read the original over several times and then cover it up and write the meaning out in our own words.

Another trick is to imagine that we're explaining the material to an older, educated relative or friend. This will help us write naturally, in our own voice, but without being too slangy or informal.

Once the paraphrase is written, we then look back at the original and make sure we have conveyed the same meaning in the paraphrase: nothing added, no essential meaning dropped.

Our paraphrases can fail in two ways. Example of faulty paraphrases appear below, based on this original: "Contrary to what we usually believe . . . the best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times--although such experiences can also be enjoyable if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile." --Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

1. **A bad paraphrase results from borrowing too many of the original words**, stealing the original author's wording. Again and again, the following paraphrase steals word groups from the original: Csikszentmihalyi writes that surprisingly, the best moments in our lives aren't when we are relaxing, passive, and receptive. Of course, it's true that if we have worked hard in attaining them, they can be enjoyable. When do the best

moments occur? When we're stretched to our limits trying to do something that is difficult and worthwhile.

2. A bad paraphrase results from simply plugging different words (synonyms) into the identical structure of the original, stealing the original author's sentence/paragraph structure. See how close the following paraphrase is to the original structure?

Csikszentmihalyi writes that unlike what we normally think, the most wonderful times generally happen when our body or intellect is pulled to its boundaries in a freely-chosen struggle to achieve a thing that is challenging and valuable.

Of course, some phrases don't need to be paraphrased if they are the actual name of something. Examples are *coming of age* novel, search *and destroy*, the medical term *failure to thrive*, and *catch-and-release fishing*.

How do we let readers know where the borrowed material begins and ends? It's obvious when we quote--quotation marks mark the beginning and end of the borrowed material. But when we paraphrase? *The trick is to open with a signal and close with the page number.* We "sandwich" our paraphrases like this: SIGNAL paraphrase SOURCE. Readers will then see that everything between the signal and the parenthetical citation is something that we have borrowed. Otherwise, we might get credit for a good idea that was actually part of the paraphrase, or the author we're paraphrasing might get credit for something that was actually our brilliant idea!

Diana Hacker's *Pocket Style Manual* or *A Writer's Reference* also has great material on effective paraphrasing.

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For Instructors:
Some Ideas on Helping Students Learn Paraphrasing

You might tell students to expect paraphrasing to be more difficult than quoting. It's challenging because when we paraphrase, we have to completely change the wording and the sentence/paragraph structure into our own, and yet at the same time convey the identical meaning of the original!

Students wonder why we have to paraphrase at all. Ask them that question. Ask them to imagine what would happen if they drew from five different sources on a particular page. If they just quoted those five different sources rather than paraphrasing some of them into their own style, the page would sound like an awkward patchwork of many different voices. By mostly paraphrasing, they make the writing sound unified: their unique voice dominates and shines through.

Tell students that another reason to paraphrase (or a useful side advantage) is that paraphrasing forces us to really understand the original-- if we just quote it, we don't have to wrestle with it and make it our own the way we do when we paraphrase.

How do we paraphrase? Many handbooks suggest that we read the original over several times and then cover it up and write the meaning out in our own words.

Another trick is to imagine that we're explaining the material to an older, educated relative or friend. This will help us write naturally, in our own voice, but without being too informal.

Once the paraphrase is written, we then look back at the original and make sure we have conveyed the same meaning in the paraphrase: nothing added, no essential meaning dropped.

Our paraphrases can fail in two ways. Example of faulty paraphrases appear below, based on this original: "Contrary to what we usually believe . . . the best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times--although such experiences can also be enjoyable if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile." --Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

1. **A bad paraphrase results from borrowing too many of the original words**, stealing the original author's wording. Again and again, the following paraphrase steals word groups from the original: Csikszentmihalyi writes that surprisingly, the best moments in our lives aren't when we are relaxing, passive, and receptive. Of course, it's true that if we have worked hard in attaining them, they can be enjoyable. When do the best moments occur? When we're stretched to our limits trying to do something that is difficult and worthwhile.

2. A bad paraphrase results from simply plugging different words (synonyms) into the identical structure of the original, stealing the original author's sentence/paragraph structure. See how close the following paraphrase is to the original structure?

Csikszentmihalyi writes that unlike what we normally think, the most wonderful times generally happen when our body or intellect is pulled to its boundaries in a freely-chosen struggle to achieve a thing that is challenging and valuable.

Explain to students that some phrases don't need to be paraphrased if they are the actual name of something. Examples would be *coming of age* novel, search *and destroy*, the medical term *failure to thrive*, and *catch-and-release fishing*.

How do we let readers know where the borrowed material begins and ends? It's obvious when we quote--quotation marks mark the beginning and end of the borrowed material. But when we paraphrase? *The trick is to open with a signal and close with the page number* (this boils down to reminding students of the crucial importance of signal when we paraphrase). Tell students to "sandwich" their paraphrases like this: SIGNAL paraphrase SOURCE. Readers will then see that everything between the signal and the parenthetical citation is borrowed. Otherwise, we might get credit for a good idea that was actually part of the paraphrase, or the author we're paraphrasing might get credit for something that was actually our brilliant idea!

You can choose a very brief passage (one or two sentences) that students would enjoy and have them work on paraphrasing it. You can write it on the board. Then have students spend a few minutes paraphrasing it. Tell them you'll call on several of them to write their solutions on the board. Evaluate them together. Make sure you find something to praise in each one, even if most of it is an inaccurate or incomplete paraphrase. Offer a lot of praise for students' hard work and comprehension, and tell them that paraphrasing is challenging, even for professors and scholars like us!

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