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## Paraphrasing > Summarizing: A Good Means to a Better End

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Paraphrase writing, in the context of English composition instruction, is basically a means of rewriting reading material from various sources such as newspapers and textbooks. Unlike a summary, the purpose of a paraphrase is not to shorten or condense the original reading passage, but to adequately restate its content by using synonyms or (slightly) different wording. In order to effectively take advantage of this technique, students need to practice and rewrite on a regular basis; merely introducing paraphrasing once during the school term is neither practical nor particularly beneficial. These days, as various texts and teaching materials are available that showcase paraphrasing, it seems most appropriate to introduce and include it for supplementary reading and composition practice at the intermediate level of instruction.

パラフレーズ英作法というのは、新聞記事や教科書などに載っている記事を書き直す方法の一つである。概要と基本的に違うのは、パラフレーズの場合、もとの文章の内容、文体などを変えずに、他の適切な単語を使いながら書き直す点である。このテクニクを効果的に習得するためには、学生は一学期に一回だけ練習するのではなく、毎週一回繰り返して練習することがポイントである。最近、パラフレーズを採用するテキストや教材が増えており、特に中級クラスの英作法や読本の補助教材として導入するのが効果的である。

While paraphrase writing cannot be considered composition in the full sense, as creativity is neither expected nor stressed, it can be viewed as an effective writing tool, one that when applied consistently, can point students in the direction of effective summary writing. More of a means than an end in itself, paraphrasing is a multi-faceted tool that the writing instructor can apply in a number of ways, and is especially useful in guiding students from sentence to paragraph writing. Some notable advantages of paraphrasing are that it:

- a) combines reading and writing in an accessible way;
- b) enables students to focus on key vocabulary and essential points raised in the text;
- c) can help expand their knowledge of synonyms (or antonyms) and certain contextual constraints on their usage;
- d) helps students learn to vary word form;
- e) helps them learn to vary sentence word order; (i.e., active > passive form)
- f) can lead to development of a stylistic alternative to the original text;
- g) can help clarify some of the key information presented in the original.

While not limited to these benefits, the above indicate that paraphrasing is more than a means of avoiding plagiarism or the overuse of quotations; two rather negative aspects of composition writing with which paraphrasing tends to be associated. With the aim of expanding the learner's facility with synonym use, word form and word order, paraphrase writing in the EFL (or ESL) context is somewhat removed from its traditional role in the "regular" English class. Herein, instructors would occasionally use paraphrasing as a means of emulating (and thus, somehow, absorbing) a certain professional writer's style. In the EFL writing class, paraphrasing provides a semi-structured medium through which students show that they can understand and effectively restate the main content of assigned reading material.

### Preliminaries

Paraphrasing tends to be addressed in most composition-oriented textbooks and is best introduced at the intermediate level. Many writing instructors use a particular paraphrase-writing component of a textbook to practice or review the use of alternative word forms, synonyms, use of the passive, etc. to help students flex their vocabulary skills. Initially, fully structured sentence rephrasing exercises may be utilized to prepare the learners for a series of longer, guide question-based (semi-structured) paraphrases to follow.

A typical paraphrasing exercise, devised for use in an intermediate-level ESL course that this instructor taught at a community college in California, requires students to rephrase seven related sentences, three of which are shown below:

(S#1) Before two individuals get married, the Communist Party (in China) makes sure they know their rights and responsibilities under the Marriage Law.

[PARAPHRASE] >> Prior to marriage, the Communist Party makes sure the two individuals know their rights and responsibilities under the Marriage Law.

[Note the change in WORD FORM: married > marriage]

(S#2) During the time of arranged marriages, young people were often mismatched.

>> When marriages were arranged, young people were often mismatched.

[Note that the main change here involves the use of SYNONYMS, during vs. when or while]

(S#7) There is a saying that Chinese women have two life stages: before they have children and after

they have children.

>> It is said that Chinese women have two stages in life: the first is before childbirth and the second is after childbirth.

[Note the shift from verb phrase “TO HAVE CHILDREN” to the noun phrase “CHILDBIRTH” and change in WORD ORDER]

A number of EFL/ESL composition textbooks include somewhat similar paraphrasing exercises that help students to practice different word forms, move from active to passive voice, and use appropriate synonyms. At this stage, appropriateness of word choice is emphasized, but it is important that the instructor also explain that economy of expression is a desirable tenet of paraphrase writing. This is important in preparing the class for summarization of multiparagraph readings at a more advanced level of instruction.

### Procedure

In order to effectively practice and incorporate paraphrasing into the (intermediate-level) composition class, bi-weekly practice, including rewrites if possible, seems to be a minimal requirement. Thus, particularly industrious instructors may work in as many as eight

paraphrases in the course of a semester. As to what constitutes appropriate reading material for this purpose, this instructor has found that human interest-type articles gleaned from local newspapers tend to work well. Ideally, the subject matter should be linked to one of the key compositional modes, such as comparison/contrast or cause and effect, which are traditionally covered in intermediate-level writing. Conversation-oriented textbooks such as *Spectrum* may also provide excellent material for paraphrasing; for example, in Book 5 an interview-based reading passage, “What is This Thing Called Love?” (ibid., pp. 110-111) served to encourage extensive rewording practice on the students’ part. Groups of EFL and ESL students alike proved adept at restating the psychologist’s ideas in a complete paragraph, thus noting in the process that the chemical nature of love is a far cry from the romantic version. Through regular practice and teacher feedback, students are expected to use paraphrasing as a means of summarizing increasingly complex reading passages by the upper intermediate or pre-advanced level.

As to the format of the paraphrase and basic shape of the paraphrase writing activity:

- Paraphrases should be limited in length from 50 to 100 words, or approximately one-third the length of the original text. (A variation on this that some

instructors prefer is to set up a maximum of ten sentences.)

- Readings should correspond to chapters in the main textbook; in other words, a comparison-contrast-based paraphrasing exercise or reading should accompany the particular chapter in the text that covers comparison and contrast.
- Guide questions should focus on particular issues in the reading, such as someone’s motives (e.g., in committing a crime). Timelines are also useful, especially for narrative writing, in that they help students reconstruct key events.
- While preparing for the paraphrase writing, students may take notes, write down answers to guide questions, etc., but may **not** look at the original text while producing the actual paraphrase. Note cards, on which students jot down certain key words or phrases, are useable, but instructors are advised to circulate around the class and check to see that students are not lifting entire sentences from the text. (The use of dictionaries can be allowed to reduce pressure, as students are normally given no more than an hour to complete the paraphrase itself.)

- For certain paraphrases, “cultural literacy” questions can be added to supplement the students’ background knowledge (e.g., the names of the planets or Roman gods and goddesses for an article focusing on the solar system).
- Paraphrases are to be done in class. (It is up to the individual instructor whether he/she wishes to allow for rewrites or improved scores.)

## Conclusion

There is really nothing new or mysterious about paraphrase writing, which was apparently first advanced by the Roman educator, Quintilian, and has an approximately 1900-year history. The EFL/ESL student, in particular, can benefit from regular paraphrase practice by using a variety of word forms and synonyms that cogently and effectively express the main ideas that a given writer is trying to convey. Instructors should also note that paraphrasing tends to reduce text-dependency or over quoting, a practice that it is designed to preempt. Instructors who rush into summarization at the intermediate level may find to their dismay that students have not developed the ability to restate the main content in 1000, much less than in 100 words.

Unfortunately, various textbooks that include paraphrase writing as a lead-in to summary writing do not follow it up at regular intervals; thus, it is left up to

the instructor to supply and supplement. When varied topics and materials are presented, the results can be quite appealing, as two students from a pre-advanced class recently showed with the following conclusions to the aforementioned article, “What is This Thing Called Love?”

Original Wording >> (Interviewer’s question)

Q: “How do you keep love alive?”

(Psychologist’s answer) A: “The brain has to experience a change, or there will be no excitement.”

Students’ paraphrases:

(1) To keep love alive, we need newness, sharing, and growth [so as] not to fall into a routine life. (Southeast Asian female)

(2) If people are in love, they work better in all ways, but if you want your relationship to last forever, newness has to be everywhere at all times. (Hispanic female)

Although love is clearly beyond the ability of most of us to define, and a paragraph-length writing on the subject, “What is Love?” may not provide a definitive answer, the students here seem to be pointed in the right direction.

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