

Paraphrasing

One of the most important skills in college-level writing is paraphrasing, which involves restating a passage from another text in different words. A good paraphrase will capture the meaning of the original passage without repeating the phrasing. Instructors often encourage their students to rely more on paraphrasing than quoting. This handout reviews six common strategies that strong writers use when they paraphrase a portion of another text.

Strategies

- **Use synonyms for key words.** A synonym is a word with the same meaning as another word. No two words mean exactly the same thing, but words are often close enough in meaning that they can be substituted for one another. When you paraphrase, use synonyms whenever possible. For example, if the original text refers to a new government policy as a “major change,” you could rephrase as “significant shift.”
- **Change the voice.** In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action indicated by the verb. In passive voice, the subject receives the action. If the original is in active voice, you could rephrase in the passive (or the other way around). Thus, if the original text uses active voice in a sentence like “The governor signed the bill,” you could rephrase in passive voice as “The statute was signed into law by the governor.”
- **Create an introductory phrase.** A sentence can often be reordered by moving an idea to the beginning in an introductory phrase. Consider this sentence: “The decisive battles of this long war were fought in January and February of 1745.” Now see how this paraphrase uses an introductory phrase to reorder the ideas in the sentence: “In the winter months of 1745, the armies of England and France fought the most important battles of this protracted conflict.”
- **Combine short sentences or break long sentences.** Combining two or more short sentences or breaking a long sentence into two or more shorter sentences is one of the best ways to rephrase in your own words. Imagine a passage like this: “The earth does not follow a circular orbit around the sun. Gravitational forces from other planets in the solar system force it into an elliptical orbit.” You could combine those sentences like this: “The gravity of other planets causes the earth to follow an elliptical rather than a circular path as it orbits the sun.”
- **Change the sentence type.** Simple sentences have just one independent clause. Compound sentences include at least two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet). Complex sentences have at least one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. Strong writers look for opportunities to change the sentence type when they paraphrase. Read this compound sentence: “The coach wanted a timeout, but the referees did not see him desperately trying to get their attention.” That sentence could be rephrased as a complex sentence, like this: “Although the coach frantically attempted to signal the refs, they never noticed his request for a timeout.”
- **Change from positive to negative (or vice versa).** Good writers often change the “polarity” while paraphrasing a passage in order to match the tone and purpose of their own writing. Note the use of the negative in this passage: “The Clean Air Act wasn’t passed until 1970.” A positive rephrase might sound like this: “Congress passed the Clean Air Act more than 50 years ago.”

Example

Read the original passage, taken from Mary Roach's *Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void*. Then read the paraphrase.

Original: Gemini VII, which launched on December 4, 1965, was a medical dress rehearsal for the Apollo lunar program. A round-trip moon mission takes two weeks, and no astronaut had spent that much time in zero gravity. NASA's record at that point was eight days. (193)

Paraphrase: In late 1965, the seventh Gemini mission in late 1965 gave NASA an opportunity to learn about the medical effects Apollo astronauts would experience during extended time in microgravity. A moon mission takes two weeks, but at that point, the longest American space mission had lasted just eight days.

Follow-up Questions

1. Identify the strategies used in the above paraphrase.
2. Write your own paraphrase of the original passage above.
3. Review the examples provided in the explanations of the strategies on the other side of this page. In most of them, more than one paraphrasing strategy is used. Identify at least one other strategy used in the examples for these strategies:
 - **Change the voice:**
 - **Create an introductory phrase:**
 - **Combine short sentences:**
 - **Change from positive to negative:**