PARAPHRASING:
THE AUTHOR'S THOUGHTS
IN YOUR WORDS

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In order to respond to other people, we need to understand their thoughts, but we often read inaccurately and incompletely. Writing a careful paraphrase—that is, putting the meaning of a text into new words—makes you pay close attention to the author's ideas and thereby improves your level of understanding. In paraphrasing, you should constantly keep the meaning of the original in mind, but express the same ideas in a different way. Two tricks that will help you find new ways to express the author's meaning are *substituting synonyms* and *rearranging sentence structure*. Paraphrasing will help you communicate the meaning of a difficult passage. When you go on to make your own argument, it will allow you to refer to another writer's thoughts while you maintain control of the focus and tone of the argument.

Bazerman, Charles. *The Informed Writer*, Boston.
Houghton, c1989.   (3rd ed).

Getting the Message

How often has someone not understood what you were saying? If you are like most of us, it happens many times a day. Sometimes people misunderstand us entirely; sometimes they don't even seem to hear us, although a few minutes later they may give us back our own words, claiming the words are their own. (Such situations provide standard jokes for television situation comedies.) More often people understand only part of what we say; they get the general idea but miss the fine points or particular thrust of our comments.

On the other hand, people who listen closely and understand what other people say make more relevant responses. The more they understand another person's comments in detail, the more they can respond directly to the problems and issues on the other person's mind. Moreover, hearing something new may inspire new ideas in such careful listeners. The closer they get to what the speaker is saying, the more a real interchange of ideas takes place. And new thoughts are more likely to arise on *both* sides.

It is very hard to listen carefully to what another person is saying. People, including ourselves, are more likely to hear what they want to hear. We like to hear what we already know. Curiosity and desire for knowledge are strong human motives, but we also have an opposite tendency to "stick by our guns" and defend the viewpoints we have already come to believe in. We resist hearing—let alone adopting—any new viewpoint or explanation. These conserving instincts underlie our positive sense of integrity (as in *integer,* "maintaining wholeness"). But they also work to spare us the effort of dealing with too many challenges.

If we know or care little about a subject, hearing something new about it will not disturb us, but if we have made up our minds and hearts, new ideas are a serious threat to our peace of mind. C. Northcote Parkinson, the economist and observer of bureaucracies, has pointed out that the less important a decision is, the more time is devoted to discussing it.* Two hours will be spent on the new color scheme of the executive conference room—but only five minutes on the opening of a new factory. On the important issues, most everyone either has an unshakable opinion already or shrinks from the effort and responsibility involved in making a serious decision, so they get the anxiety-arousing items on the agenda out of the way as quickly as possible.

*C. Northcote Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law and Other Studies in Administration* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 32.

Read What Is Written

We have many tricks to avoid getting the message when we read. To avoid the challenge of confronting another writer's thoughts, we may simply never pick up books that will give us a hard time (think of that textbook you just dread opening). If we do get as far as turning to page 1 and looking at the words, there are many ways we can appear to read without really reading.

Immediately assuming that a book contains nothing worthwhile allows us to focus on its faults and not think about what the author is trying to tell us. If we spend the whole time arguing with what a book says, we may not even get a clear impression of its main message and the evidence the writer marshals. Disturbing, challenging books are especially likely to make us react negatively at many intermediate points. Petty fault finding is a very effective way to avoid considering whether a book might indeed have something to tell us.

If we aren't quarreling with a challenging book, we may be assuming it says what we want it to say—and not what it actually does say. We may latch on to phrases that sound similar to ideas we subscribe to and then mindlessly skim those parts that sound unfamiliar or too complex. Just because we interpret a few words as similar to our own thoughts doesn't mean that the writer had anything like our thoughts in mind. We may even ignore a few key qualifying words, such as *not generally* or *rarely*, to make the book read the way we want it to! Even if we avoid such extreme distortion, we still may smooth over more subtle differences. Given the variety of human thought, we cannot assume that any writer shares our exact perspective on all points.

Right Word, Wrong Meaning

We may even read a word, know the meaning of it, and still misunderstand the meaning the author intended. Words, particularly abstractions, can have many varied meanings to different people. To a debater a *point of view* is an opinion, to an art critic it is the angle from which we view a piece of sculpture, and to a novelist it is the character through whose eyes we see the story. Certain loosely defined words like *fact, objectivity*, and *determinism* have been under dispute for centuries, and each user is likely to have a particular meaning in mind. If we want to understand a particular writer, we have to understand the word according to that writer's definition.

Other words gain popularity so rapidly that they are used to describe many different ideas before any one meaning gets set. The kind of analysis called *structuralism* differs substantially in the fields of anthropology, sociology, religion, literature, history, and philosophy.

Even if a word is used with its most common meaning, we may misunderstand it unless we remain sensitive to the *context*. Everyone knows what the animal called a *horse* is, but that word still holds very different meanings

to a jockey, a bettor, and a ten-year-old child. In order to understand how and why any writer is using any word, we have to recognize the writer's way of thinking and his or her special interests. Although two authors may be concerned with military force, they may be concerned with separate issues and may make different kinds of connections and arguments. In reading an author interested in the present-day uses of military force in international politics, we must be receptive to an entirely new kind of reasoning than we would find in a writer interested in the social structure of a militarized country. Each of the works might shed light on the other, but they are operating in two separate spheres.

Review for an Overview

Once a reader is receptive to the language and the spirit of a written work, the reader still has to be willing to see how the parts fit together into a coherent whole. Every book does not fit together well: the argument may ramble, or the later chapters may contradict the earlier. Sometimes a book coheres on one level, clearly presenting the chronological narrative of, say, Thomas Jefferson's life, but lacks coherence on another—not explaining the development of his character. Until we have made a serious attempt to draw the parts together in our own minds, we will have no basis for evaluating a book's overall significance. Fortunately, most books are more than collections of loosely connected statements, and we must look for the significant connections.

The remainder of this chapter discusses paraphrasing, a task that requires a close reading of a given passage and a careful rewriting. We might think of paraphrasing as a trick that forces us to get the message when we read. In recasting another writer's thoughts into our own words, we must pay close attention to the content of statements and the precise meanings of words. The task of paraphrase keeps our attention on the page. In later chapters we will return to expressing personal thoughts and reactions—and to contributing to the conversation.

Rethinking, Restating

Every school day at almost every level, many students are asked to restate in their own words information they encounter in books, lectures, and films. Teachers assign this kind of loose paraphrase to see whether students have remembered and understood the course material. For such purposes, a student needs only to reproduce a few key concepts without making gross errors. True paraphrase, however, is part of a larger process of understanding

Different Words . . .

Let's look a bit more closely at the two strategies used here. Word substitution allows you to explore the meanings of individual words and see how they are used exactly in the passage. Most words have a number of meanings, only one of which is usually appropriate to the passage in question. For example, the word *fathers* has a range of meanings from "male parents" to "a group of early writers in the Christian Church." Among those meanings is that of people who start something, particularly founders of a line of descent, tribe, or community. It is in this sense that President Lincoln is using the word. Certainly he is not referring to Roman senators or to Roman Catholic priests. Given the eighty-seven-year period he mentions, we know the waves of immigration to the United States between 1776 and 1863 rule out Lincoln's use of *fathers* to mean the male parents, grandfathers, great- and great-great-grandfathers of those present.

The specific use of a word in a passage often highlights a particular aspect of the word, so even if you find a generally correct synonym, you may need to explore further to bring out how the word is being used in context. In this sentence, even though President Lincoln uses the words *fathers* and *men* following the practice of his time to refer to humankind in all-male terms, he may not consciously mean to emphasize gender. Nor does Lincoln convey any particular concern with direct genetic lineage. His interest lies more with the creation of a political and spiritual community whose membership does not depend on who one's actual parents were, where they came from, or what they did. Therefore, the paraphrase uses the gender-free word *ancestors*, and then qualifies it with the words *political and spiritual*. The concept of creation, inherent in the word *fathers*, is supported by several words in the original, including *brought forth* and *new*. This idea is reinforced by the paraphrases chosen for these words, "created" and "that did not exist before."

In your search for appropriate synonyms for substitution, reference books such as a dictionary and thesaurus (dictionary of synonyms) will be of some use. A dictionary can help you find the general meanings of unfamiliar words or remind you of the range of possible meanings for more familiar words. But you must check the meanings against the context of the passage. You must ask how any definition of a word would fit in with the overall text

and responding to a specific written passage. Before you can use or argue with anyone's ideas, you must understand these ideas accurately. Careful paraphrase requires close attention to every nuance of meaning so that, when you later come to refer to these ideas or argue against them, you will know exactly what you are working with. Paraphrase can serve as a form of note taking, allowing you to preserve the writer's exact meaning in those terms that you understand best. Even more important, paraphrase can serve as a way of referring to writers' thoughts in your own original essays so that you can build on and answer others' ideas even while you are advancing your own.

To *paraphrase* is to restate a passage precisely in your own words and phrasing in order to clarify the meaning. The task at first does not appear difficult. However, words that are similar are not always interchangeable, and the meanings of words shift subtly with their context and their use. Further, sentences put words into exact relationships. Thus creating an accurate paraphrase forces you to consider both the precise use of words and the sense of the entire statement. In considering the word-by-word meaning of a text and in searching for possible substitutions, the paraphraser must literally come to terms with what has been written. Turning your understanding of a text into written language banishes the looseness of understanding that often remains hidden in the privacy of your silent reading.

In writing paraphrases you must attend to two points: the meaning of words as they are used in context and the relationship between words. In both you must reach for more than loose approximation. You must include all that was in the original, without adding anything new and without misrepresenting the original content.

Two Techniques

Two techniques will help you gain a precise understanding of the original: substituting synonyms and rearranging the sentence structure. To paraphrase the opening sentence of the Gettysburg Address, for example, you might replace the original words with words of the same meaning. The original reads:

> Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

First, replacing synonyms may lead to this initial draft of the paraphrase.

> Eighty-seven years before today, our political and spiritual ancestors created in North America a country that did not exist before, thought of in freedom and devoted to establishing the principle that all people are born with the same rights.

meaning. Similarly a thesaurus may remind you of alternative words, but then you must select intelligently and appropriately among them.

For example, *Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms* includes among the synonyms for *conceive* the words *think, imagine, fancy,* and *realize*. Although in some contexts *conceive* does mean the same as *imagine* (as in the question "How could you conceive I would do that?"), in the opening of the Gettysburg Address, *imagine* is inappropriate. *Imagine* implies something that has nothing to do with reality, but Lincoln was using *conceive* to suggest a thought that leads to a reality, almost as though the idea gives birth to the reality, as a child is conceived in its mother's womb. Similarly, *fancy* is not a serious enough thought and *realize* is too sudden, too unplanned. The only word from that list that fits appropriately is *think*, a form of which was used in our paraphrase.

Sometimes the dictionary or thesaurus may not offer adequate substitutions, but as you think through why the listed alternatives are not appropriate for the context, you may come up with a better word or phrase of your own. Use these reference books as resources to help you think about meanings, but not as sources of absolute word equivalents. Avoid suffering the fate of one poor student who, looking for a synonym for *pickle*, wound up describing a sandwich served with a predicament. Your main task in paraphrasing must always be to reconstruct the meaning of the original as sharply as you can. (See pages 459–462 for further advice on precise word choice.)

Different Sentences . . .

When you start to move the structure of a sentence around, you must pay attention to how all the parts of the original sentence fit together. In particular, you must notice the central core of meaning of the sentence and how all the other parts of the sentence relate to that core. An understanding of how all the parts of a sentence are arranged around a core concept will help you bring out that core of meaning as you rewrite the sentence. Without that control of core meaning, a rewritten sentence can easily turn into gibberish.

The opening sentence of the Gettysburg Address is built on the core sentence, "Fathers brought forth a nation." Additional phrases identify the time ("four score and seven years ago") and place ("on this continent") of this event. The remainder of the sentence itemizes two ideas behind the nation ("conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"). The emphasis in the sentence is on the creation of the nation. Concepts behind nationhood are presented only as elaboration.

You may notice that the paraphrase puts great emphasis on the ideas behind the creation of the United States. The paraphraser made this choice because the Gettysburg Address as a whole emphasizes those ideas as the important issue at stake in the Civil War. The first paraphrase sentence presents the creation of a nation as an attempt to act on the concept of

freedom, rather than freedom itself being an afterthought to nationhood. By breaking the original sentence into two short ones, with each idea the focus of its own sentence, the paraphrase can give greater weight to the two concepts behind nationhood. The paraphrase emphasizes that the nation created is the living reality of those two ideas.

I believe this adjustment in the relation of parts of the sentence does reflect the meaning of the overall document. Every time you rearrange a sentence, however, you shake up the relations of its parts, and you must ask yourself whether those new relations are warranted. (See pages 454–459 for further advice on effective use of sentence structure.)

. . . But the Same Meaning

After substituting words and rearranging a sentence, you must ask yourself whether your paraphrase means the same as the original. For example, the phrase "created equal" might be paraphrased *made the same*, but *made the same* suggests that people look and act exactly alike—not Lincoln's meaning. The context of the phrase is political, and President Lincoln refers to political equality, so *born with the same rights* is a more accurate paraphrase.

Any paraphrase that does not consider the total meaning of the original can easily become as absurd as the distortions made by a student and a teacher who were discussing the meaning of a famous line from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The line is "the quality of mercy is not strained," which may be accurately paraphrased as "compassionate forgiveness is given freely and easily." But the student tried substituting words without considering context; she wanted to know whether *strained* in the passage meant "strained as in rubber band or strained as in soup." The teacher, looking only at the sentence structure, answered, "Well, since it's *not* strained anyway, I don't see that it matters."

Substituting words and moving sentence parts around do not guarantee accurate paraphrase; you must always check the meaning of the paraphrase against the meaning of the original.

Because paraphrasing makes you grapple so closely with the meaning of a text, as you reframe language you become more aware of how much control over meaning you actually have. As you look at a text word by word and phrase by phrase, you may notice where you are confused by meaning or only have a general idea of overall meaning. As you start to examine alternative phrasings, you will have to ask yourself questions about precise meanings that you have never had to ask before. As you examine the structure of sentences, you will need to reconstruct the basic relations of parts of the text, rather than just read the text as a string of loosely associated sentences about a general topic.

Start noticing where you get stuck when you work on a paraphrase. When you have difficulty rephrasing the wording of the original or where you have difficulty assembling your paraphrase may be exactly the passages where

you have not yet gained full control of meaning. By discussing those diffi-cult sections with teachers and classmates you will be increasing the subtle-ty and accuracy of your reading understanding.

Please note: a paraphrase always represents someone else's ideas even though the words are your own. Always identify the original source you are paraphrasing. Sufficient credit in a passing comment might rest in a simple phrase such as *to paraphrase Lincoln*. Chapter 18 presents more formal doc-umentation methods. Where paraphrase is given as a separate assignment, identify the source you are paraphrasing in a heading or a tag line.

Steps in Writing a Paraphrase

1. Read the original carefully.
2. Substitute words and rearrange sentences, asking yourself ques-tions about precise meanings.
3. Check the meaning of your paraphrase against the original.
4. Identify the source you are paraphrasing.

EXERCISES

1. In the passage that follows from *On Civil Disobedience* by Henry David Thoreau, identify possible substitutes for the underlined words. Be pre-pared to discuss the appropriateness of your substitutions in relation to the overall meaning of the selection.

I heartily accept the motto,—"That government is best which governs least;" and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systemati-cally. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—"That government is best which governs not at all;" and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Govern-ment is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. . . .

This American government,—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each in-stant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the