

English – General Paraphrasing

What is paraphrasing?

When you are asked to interpret and analyze or simply to enjoy difficult literary texts, paraphrasing is a good place to begin. When you paraphrase, **you are expressing a writer's text in your words**, restating it in such a way that what was complex, obscure, archaic, or otherwise confusing is now simple, modern, and direct. This means that, regardless of how similar your communication is to the writer's intended meaning, your paraphrase will always be an approximation of the original text. It is not a translation, which is the casting of a text from one language into another. And it is certainly not a summary or précis, which is the condensing of a text, a breaking down of a unit into its key details. While a summary will always be a shorter text than is the original, a paraphrase is often longer than the original.

What is the point of paraphrasing?

When you paraphrase, **you are demonstrating mainly your understanding of a text's surface**—specifically, 1) **the denotations of unfamiliar words**, and 2) **the "in-other-words" sense of confusing phrases**. You are not showing (at least not overtly) your understanding of a writer's implied meanings or technical efforts and effects. It's important to note, however, that the process of paraphrasing *leads* toward interpretation; that is, it often helps you to understand and appreciate elements of a text that you otherwise might not.

As well, **you are improving your ability to comprehend what you read**—this being, naturally, an important skill for the life-long learner, but also a major part of preparing for diploma exams and other tests to follow in later schooling (and not just in language or literature courses, but in programs of all sorts).

Additionally, **you are developing your essential writing skills**—especially your ability to express ideas and images precisely, forcefully, and correctly.

Finally, **you are exercising your own creativity and problem-solving power**. After all, although you are working from someone else's text, you are also creating a text of your own, seeking out and arranging words in ways that are satisfying both to you and your reader, while still managing to stay faithful to the other writer's meaning. Further, you must be creative by 1) finding ways to restate passages even where the writer's original phrasing is entirely clear, and 2) not relying on the phrasing in your textbook's sidenotes or footnotes.

How is paraphrasing done?

First, read the passage a few times over, trying to get a general sense of the text. Sometimes your understanding of a difficult text is improved simply by reading it more than once.

If circumstances permit, read the passage aloud. Sometimes your ears make better sense of a passage than your eyes do.

In paraphrasing poetry (e.g. Shakespeare's blank verse), avoid approaching the task as a line-by-line breakdown. Rather, approach it as a thought-by-thought process, remembering that often the end of a sentence (or grammatical unit within a sentence) does not coincide with the end of a verse line, and that a single thought may stretch over several lines.

As mentioned in the section above, you are to paraphrase not only the obviously difficult passages of a text, but also those where the original phrasing is entirely clear. Though, of course, there are certain cases—for instance, in reference to proper nouns and adjectives or to specific objects and actions—where there just aren't alternate words. In such cases, use the original words.

Also, as mentioned already, do not use phrasing provided in your textbook's sidenotes or footnotes.

What does a paraphrase look like?

Macbeth – II, i, 33–64

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
35 I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
40 I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,
45 Or else worth all the rest; I see thee still,
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. There's no such thing:
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
50 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace.
55 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
And take the present horror from the time,
60 Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.
I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.

In other words —

33–34: **Am I gazing on an assassin's knife, with its grip ready for me to take hold?**

34: **Here, I'll seize you!**

35: **I can't get you, but there you are, all the same.**

36–37: **You specter of death, can't you be touched as well as you can be seen?**

37–39: **Or are you no more than an imaginary dirk, a thing forged out of mere deceit in the furnace in my mind?**

40–41: **I can still see you, and you seem as concrete as this one that I now take from my sheath.**

42–43: **You lead me in the direction I was already heading, and I intended to use exactly the same kind of weapon.**

44–45: **Either my eyes have gone mad while my other senses continue to work like any sane man's senses, or my vision is the only sense out of the five that's working correctly—for there you remain in front of me!**

46–47: **And now all along your fatal edge (i.e. to the hilt ["dudgeon"]) are drops of blood that weren't there a moment ago.**

47: **This is not real!**

48 – 49: **Just the thought of this terrifying task is toying with my right sight.**

49–51: **Here in the night** (i.e. in the darkened hemisphere of the world) **living things seem to be not just sleeping but dead, and nightmares tear through the curtains around one's bed.**

51–56: **Even now, witches are enacting rituals of devotion to ghastly Hecate, *queen* of witches. And murder, in the form of a hideous, life-sapped figure, has been roused by that deadly watcher in the night, the wolf, who eerily calls out the hour. My own steps now are like that wraith's or like Tarquin's when he stole into the home of a friend to rape that man's wife.**

56–60: **Earth, you certain and solid thing, please don't hear my treading or sense where I'm heading. I worry that even your rocks will speak out and give away my location, ruining the dead-stillness that so becomes this moment.**

60: **All the time I spend here talking ominously, Duncan is still alive.**

61: **The breath that goes along with talking blows out the fires of action.**

62–64: **I'm on my way. The business is as good as finished. The tolling of a bell draws me on to you, Duncan. Sleep through it, dear king. This bell tolls your death and draws *you* on to heaven or to hell.**

RUBRIC FOR EVALUATION OF A PARAPHRASE

PRECISION

5	Excellent	The paraphrase precisely restates the content of the original text. It does not appreciably add to, take away from, misread, read into, or otherwise distort the communication of the original text.
4	Proficient	The paraphrase closely restates the content of the original text. It may add to, take away from, misread, read into, or otherwise distort the communication of the original text, but does so only slightly.
3	Satisfactory	The paraphrase adequately restates the content of the original text. It may add to, take away from, misread, read into, or otherwise distort the communication of the original text, even significantly in spots, but the general sense of the communication is reasonably correct. OR Some passages of the original text have not actually been paraphrased. OR Some material has been appropriated from sidenotes/footnotes or teacher's prompts.
2	Limited	The paraphrase veers significantly in restating the content of the original text or is otherwise less than sufficient. It may add to, take away from, misread, read into, or otherwise distort the communication of the original text, suggesting a decidedly incomplete understanding of the original text. OR Several passages of the original text have not actually been paraphrased. OR Much material has been appropriated from sidenotes/footnotes or teacher's prompts.
1	Poor	The paraphrase indicates a thorough misreading of the original text or is otherwise insufficient.

WRITING SKILLS

5	Excellent	Diction and phrasing are consistently accurate and effective. The writer's style is notably mature. The writing demonstrates confident and consistent control of grammar, syntax, usage, and mechanics.
4	Proficient	Diction and phrasing are usually accurate and effective. The writer's style is quite mature. The writing demonstrates competent and generally consistent control of grammar, syntax, usage, and mechanics.
3	Satisfactory	Diction and phrasing are generally accurate and occasionally effective. The writer's style may be prosaic but is still appropriate. The writing demonstrates basic control of grammar, syntax, usage, and mechanics.
2	Limited	Diction and phrasing are frequently vague and/or incorrect. The writer's style is generally immature and/or inappropriate. The writing demonstrates faltering control of grammar, syntax, usage, and mechanics.
1	Poor	Diction and phrasing are consistently vague and/or incorrect. The writer's style is almost wholly immature and/or inappropriate. The writing demonstrates a lack of control of grammar, syntax, usage, and mechanics.