

## **DEVELOPING PARAPHRASING SKILLS: A PRE-PARAPHRASING MINI-LESSON**

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### **Introduction:**

As high school writers learn how to integrate ideas from sources into their own writing, they often have difficulty putting these ideas into their own words. Developing paraphrase skills is especially difficult for nonnative speaker of English, who tend to have fewer vocabulary resources and less knowledge of complex grammatical structures than their native English speaking classmates.

Some of the problems that result when developing writers use ideas from sources in their own texts include:

1. They copy significant parts of the original word-for-word without quotations.
2. They attempt to paraphrase by substituting synonyms for some of the words in the original text. The resulting “paraphrase” may be problematic in several ways:
  - a) It may be too close to the original text because, while changing some of the vocabulary, it copies the sentence structure of the original text.
  - b) It may retain words and phrases of the original text that reflect the author’s creative use of language; in other words, such “borrowing” is unacceptable without direct quotation.
  - c) It may distort the meaning of the original by substituting words gleaned from a thesaurus that have different connotations.
  - d) It may be ungrammatical because substituting one word for another required syntactic changes. (For example some reporting verbs such as “said” can be followed by a *that*-clause, while others such as “told” cannot.)

In the **diagnostic statements** for the Diagnostic Writing Service, some of these problems are described in the second section, “Understanding and Use of the Text.”

Of course, one way students learn to paraphrase well is through extensive reading, building general and academic vocabulary and getting a lot of writing practice. However, students can also benefit from guided practice in transforming original texts into their own words.

This mini-lesson prompts writers to transform the structure of original sentences when paraphrasing by giving them substitution cues. It focuses primarily on the problem stated above in 2a. In replacing a word or words in the original, writers must also make structural changes to produce a grammatical sentence.

This lesson is called a “pre-paraphrase” exercise because a) it is guided: you give writers the words to substitute; and b) the resulting sentence represents a “first step” in a possible paraphrase; the transformation may still be too close to the original and need further lexical changes. (You and your students can of course further transform a sentence in the mini-lesson exercise if you wish, as explained in Step 5 of the procedures below.)

A guided, step-by-step approach to developing paraphrasing skills recognizes that paraphrasing is a very complex process. Such an approach assumes that developing writers usually need to be given more than just the directive to “put it in your own words” or, as seen in many composition handbooks, an original text sentence with a few examples of “bad” paraphrases followed by a “good” paraphrase.

### **Mini-Lesson**

#### **Materials:**

1. The Subject A Passage **“Why People Don’t Help in a Crisis”** by John Darley and Bibb Latané, reproduced as a handout or put on an overhead transparency for students to read.
2. The exercise below, reproduced on a handout, put on a transparency, or written on the board (Note: It is not necessary to use the entire exercise; you can limit the number of sentences depending on your time constraints. Keep in mind, though that students need considerable practice transforming sentence structures.)

**Time:** Part 1: 15 minutes reading; Part 2: 20 minutes explaining the lesson and modeling the exercise; Part 3: 30 minutes for the exercise. (Note: Part 1 could be assigned as homework before class; Part 3 could be assigned as homework for the next class.)

#### **Procedures:**

## **Introduction to the Lesson**

1. Have students read the passage for homework or in class. Ask for volunteers to summarize the main points of the passage orally so that students understand the gist.
2. Explain the importance of paraphrasing skills in academic writing: the need to express ideas from sources in your own words, avoiding excessive quotation. What you say here depends on previous instruction and where you are fitting this lesson into your coursework.
3. Tell students that “using their own words” means not only substituting vocabulary in an original sentence but also changing the sentence structure. Explain that in academic writing they often will not be paraphrasing one sentence as another sentence; for example, they might paraphrase several sentences from the original as one sentence in their own text. However, in this guided exercise, they will work on paraphrasing sentences (and parts of sentences) to practice transforming sentence structures.

## **Modeling the Exercise**

4. Direct students to the second paragraph of the passage. Write this sentence segment on the board (or put on a transparency), followed by the cue in parentheses.

All of these explanations share one characteristic.  
(is present)

5. Ask students how they could incorporate the cued phrase in a rewrite to begin a paraphrase of the original sentence. Students will see (or should!) that they cannot substitute “is present” for “share”: the relationship of the two noun phrases (the subject and object) to the verb must be reversed. Thus, the object “one characteristic” becomes the subject of the new sentence. As a class, rewrite the sentence using the cued replacement.

Example: One characteristic is present in all of these explanations.

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### **Expansion of Step 5 (Optional)**

If you have time and wish to have students paraphrase other parts of the sentence, ask them to consider rephrasings of either of the nouns. For example, ask what word could replace “characteristic.” Emphasize that they need to think of words that will fit the context. Not every synonym of “characteristic” would appropriately describe the information that follows in the passage. Elicit a paraphrase of “all of these explanations” by

directing them to the ideas in the previous sentence. (To what explanations are they referring?) You might end up with something like this:

One common idea is present in all three reasons why bystanders don't intervene.  
(Original: All of these explanations share one characteristic.)

Note how hard it would be for students to understand the process involved in this paraphrase if you just gave it as an example of an “acceptable” paraphrase rather than working on a rewrite together. The fact that the paraphrase of the last noun phrase depends heavily on previous text is an important point for students to learn—but that could be the focus of another paraphrasing lesson!

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6. Now give students one more part of this sentence to work on with a partner:

Write on the board:

They set witnesses who do not intervene apart from the rest of us.  
(are separated)

To get them started with pairwork, ask students:

- 1) What words in the original text has a meaning related to “separate”? (They should identify “set” and “apart,” a phrasal verb that will need to be taken out of the sentence.)
- 2) Who or what is separated? (They should identify “witnesses” and “the rest of us.”)

This cue prompts a transformation into passive without the agent, or “doer,” “they” deleted. When students have had a few minutes to work on the transformation, ask someone to put a rewrite on the board. Help the student make any needed changes for a grammatical sentence. A first start on a paraphrase, which transforms the basic structure, could be:

Witnesses who do not intervene are separated from the rest of us.

You could work on rephrasing other parts if time permits or move on to the exercise.

8. Give students one or more of the sentences below to rewrite based on the cues for classwork or homework: Explain that they can add, delete or rephrase words as needed. Remind students that a) paraphrasing is hard

work and cannot be done quickly and b)they need always to be thinking about the context—the other sentences around the text—as they rewrite ideas. Sample pre-paraphrases (rewrites needing further revision to be good paraphrases) follow the exercise.

### **PRE-PARAPHRASING: EXERCISE**

Directions: Rewrite each of the sentences, using the words in parentheses. Look first for the part of the original sentence that will need to be replaced. Find the subject of any verbs—who is doing what? Make any other changes you think are needed.

1. People trying to interpret a situation often look at those around them to see how to react. (base reactions on)
2. There are three things bystanders must do if they are to intervene in an emergency. (necessary)
3. In a crowd, then, each person is less likely to notice a potential emergency than when alone. (tends to....less)
4. Even if a person defines an event as an emergency...(decides)
5. ... the presence of other bystanders may still make each person less likely to intervene. (may feel less inclined)

Sample Rewrites:

1. People trying to interpret a situation often base their reactions on those around them.
2. Three things are necessary for bystanders to intervene in an emergency.
3. In a crowd, then, each person tends to notice a potential emergency less than when alone.
- 4 Even if a person decides that an event is an emergency...
- 5 ...each person may feel less inclined to intervene in the presence of other bystanders.

9. For the next class, ask for volunteers to put rewrites on the board. Help students make corrections as needed. Because these structural transformations are difficult, you should expect that most of the rewrites will not be error free. This will provide an opportunity to review relevant grammatical points and academic vocabulary (e.g., in sentence 4, verbs that take noun complements similar to “defines as” and those that take that-clause complements like “decides—many verbs used in academic writing fall into one of those two categories.) Once again, stress that this is a pre-paraphrase exercise so that students do not think that the resulting rewrites represent acceptable paraphrases.

### Post Exercise Assessment:

For a check on students' development of paraphrasing skills, have them rewrite these sentences from the passage based on the cues. Tell them not to change the form of the words in parentheses (e.g., "influence" in 2 should not be passivized as "are influenced" to replace "are shaped.")

1. But Americans consider it bad manners to look closely at other people in public. (think that)
2. The bystander's reactions are shaped by the actions of others... (influence)  
(If your students are advanced give them the cue "react" also)

Sample rewrites:

1. But American think that it is bad manners to look closely...
2. The actions of others influence the bystander's reaction.  
(If "react" is also prompted: The actions of other influence how bystanders react.)

This brief exercise assesses whether students know: a) that a clause with subject and verb is required after a "that"-complement and b) that the subject and by-phrase object in [2] must be reversed to achieve the appropriate logical relationship; in other words, the passive sentence needs to be transformed into an active one.

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A final note (or perhaps "caveat"):

Working on paraphrase skills apart from actual student writing is tricky! In doing guided paraphrasing exercises, students should not end up thinking that the ordering of information in sentences is arbitrary. How information is ordered depends on the context of a student's own text, especially what comes before that information.

As just one example, the original text used for the modeling example in this mini-lesson starts with "All of these explanations" rather than "one characteristic" in order to achieve cohesion with "many explanations for the lack of intervention in such cases" in the preceding sentence. In English, the subject of a new sentence is often a repeat or paraphrase of the new information presented at the end of the previous sentence.

Developing writers sometimes create unclear or even incomprehensible paraphrases because they do not pay attention to the context of their own writing. They may, for example, copy a personal or demonstrative pronoun

such as “it” or “this” from an original text and not realize that their readers won’t be able to identify the referent, which had been identified in the original several sentences previously.

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