

PARAPHRASE × 3

Paraphrasing is one of the simplest and most overlooked ways of discovering ideas and stimulating interpretation. Like POINTING, PARAPHRASE × 3 seeks to locate you in the local, the particular, and the concrete rather than the global, the overly general and the abstract. Rather than make a broad claim about what a sentence or passage says, a paraphrase stays much closer to the actual words.

The word *paraphrase* means to put one phrase next to (“para”) another phrase. When you recast a sentence or two—finding the best synonyms you can think of for the original language, translating it into a parallel statement—you are thinking about what the original words mean. The use of “× 3” (times 3) in our label is a reminder to paraphrase key words more than once, not settling too soon for a best synonym (see Figure 2.2).

- 1 **Select a short passage** (as little as a single sentence or even a phrase) from whatever you are studying that you think is interesting, perhaps puzzling, and especially useful for understanding the material. Assume you *don't* understand it completely, even if you think you do.
- 2 **Find synonyms for all of the key terms.** Don't just go for the gist, a loose approximation of what was said. Substitute language virtually word-for-word to produce a parallel version of the original statement.
- 3 **Repeat this rephrasing several times** (we suggest three). This will produce a range of possible implications that the original passage may possess.
- 4 **Contemplate the various versions you have produced.** Which seem most plausible as restatements of what the original piece intends to communicate?
- 5 **Decide what you now recognize about the meaning of the original passage.** What do you now recognize about the passage on the basis of your repeated restatements? What now does the passage appear to mean? What implications have the paraphrasings revealed?

FIGURE 2.2
PARAPHRASE × 3

When you paraphrase language, whether your own or language you encounter in your reading, you are not just defining terms but opening out the wide range of implications those words inevitably possess. When we read, it is easy to skip quickly over the words, assuming we know what they mean. Yet when people start talking about what particular words mean—the difference, for example, between *assertive* and *aggressive* or the meaning of ordinary words such as *polite* or *realistic* or *gentlemanly*—they usually find less agreement than expected.

Note: Different academic disciplines treat paraphrase somewhat differently. In the humanities, it is essential first to quote an important passage and then to paraphrase it. In the social sciences, however, especially in Psychology; you paraphrase but rarely if ever quote. In more advanced writing in the social sciences, paraphrase serves the purpose of producing the literature review—survey of relevant research—that forms the introduction to reports.

HOW PARAPHRASE × 3 Unlocks Implications: An Example Like the “So what?” question, paraphrasing is an effective way of bringing out implications, meanings that are there in the original but not overt. And especially if you paraphrase the same passage repeatedly, you will discover which of the words are most “slippery”—elusive, hard to define simply and unambiguously.

Let's look at a brief example of PARAPHRASE × 3. The sentence comes from a book entitled *The Literature Workshop* by Sheridan Blau. We have paraphrased it three times.

“A conviction of certainty is one of the most certain signs of ignorance and may be the best operational definition of stupidity” (213).

1. Absence of doubt is a clear indication of cluelessness and is perhaps the top way of understanding the lack of intelligence.
2. A feeling of being right is one of the most reliable indexes of lack of knowledge and may show in action the meaning of mental incapacity.
3. Being confident that you are correct is a foolproof warning that you don't know what's going on, and this kind of confidence may be an embodiment of foolishness.

Having arrived at these three paraphrases, we can use them to explore what they suggest—i.e., their implications. Here is a short list. Once you start paraphrasing, you discover that there's a lot going on in this sentence.

- One implication of the sentence is that as people come to know more and more, they feel less confident about what they know.
- Another is that ignorance and stupidity are probably not the same thing, though they are often equated.
- Another is that there's a difference between feeling certain about something and being aware of this certainty as a conviction.
- Another implication is that stupidity is hard to define—perhaps it can only be defined in practice, “operationally,” and not as an abstract concept.

As we paraphrased, we were struck by the repetition of “certainty” in “certain,” which led us to wonder about the tone of the sentence. Tone may be understood as the implicit point of view, the unspoken attitude of the statement towards itself and its readers. The piece overtly attacks “a conviction of certainty” as “a sign of ignorance” and perhaps (“may be”) “a definition of stupidity.” So by implication, being less sure you are right would be a sign of wisdom. But the statement itself seems extremely sure of itself, brimming with confidence: it asserts “a certain sign.”

One implication of this apparent contradiction is that we are meant to take the statement with a grain of salt—that is, read it as poking fun at itself (ironically), demonstrating the very attitude it advises us to avoid.

TRY THIS 2.1: Experiment with PARAPHRASE × 3

Recast the substantive language of the following statements using PARAPHRASE × 3:

- “I am entitled to my opinion.”
- “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”
- “That’s just common sense.”

What do you come to understand about these remarks as a result of paraphrasing? Which words, for example, are most slippery (that is, difficult to define and thus rephrase) and why?

It is interesting to note, by the way, that Thomas Jefferson originally wrote the words “sacred and undeniable” in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, instead of “self-evident.” So what?

TRY THIS 2.2: Paraphrase and Implication

Consider for a moment an assignment a former student of ours, Sean Heron, gave to a class of high school students he was student-teaching during a unit on the Civil War. He asked students to paraphrase three times the following sentence: “The South left the country.” His goal, he reported, was to get them to see that “because language is open to interpretation, and history is conveyed through language, history must also be open to interpretation.” Use PARAPHRASE × 3 to figure out how Sean’s sentence slants history.

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING increases your ability to learn from what you read. It is probably the single best way to arrive at ideas about what you are reading. The passage-based version differs from regular freewriting (see Chapter 1) by limiting the focus to a piece of text. It prompts in-depth analysis of a representative example, on the assumption that you’ll attain a better appreciation of the whole after you’ve explored how a piece of it works.

The more you practice PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING, the better you will get—the easier you will find things to say about your chosen passage. Ask yourself:

- “What one passage in the reading do you think most needs to be discussed—is most useful and interesting for understanding the material?”
- “What one passage seems puzzling, difficult to pin down, anomalous, or even just unclear—and how might this be explained?”

The impromptu nature of PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING encourages you to take chances, to think out loud on the page. It invites you to notice what you notice in the moment and take some stabs at what the passage might mean without having to worry about formulating a weighty thesis statement or maintaining consistency. It allows you to worry less about what you don’t understand and instead start to work things out as you write.

A lot of great papers start not as outlines but as freewrites, written in class or out (see Figure 2.3).

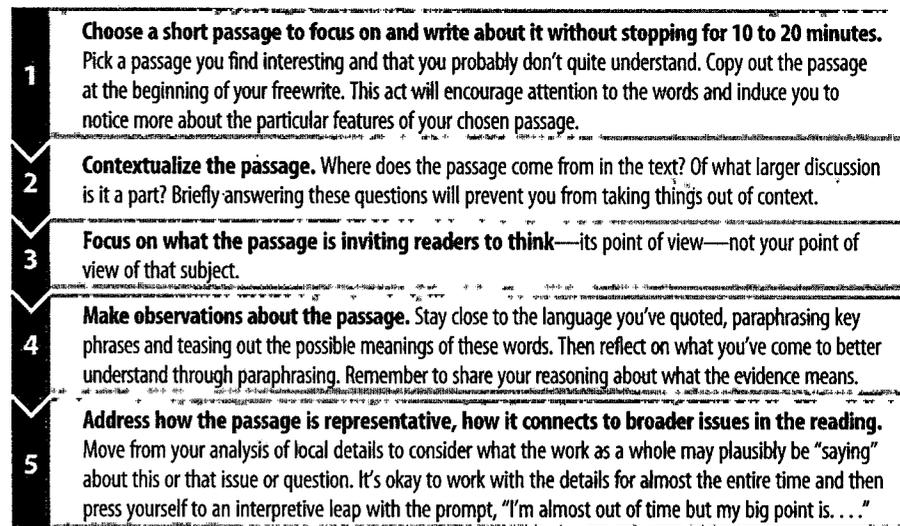


FIGURE 2.3

PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING

Note: It's okay to work with the details for almost the entire time and then press yourself to an interpretive leap with the prompt, but my big point is...

Some Moves to Make in PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITES PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING incorporates a number of the methods we have been discussing in these first two chapters. So, for example:

- it often starts with observations discovered by doing NOTICE AND FOCUS
- it grows out of doing THE METHOD, further developing the paragraph that explains why you chose one repetition, strand or binary as most important
- in analyzing the chosen passage, writers normally paraphrase key words
- and they keep the writing going by insistently ASKING “SO WHAT?” at the ends of paragraphs.

The best PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITES usually arrive at one or more of the following:

- Interpretation, which uses restatement to figure out what the sentence from the text means.
- Implication. A useful (and logical) next step is to go after implication. If X or Y is true, then what might follow from it? (Or “So what?”)
- Application. A passage that is resonant in some way for the reader might lead him or her to write about some practical way of applying the reading—for example, as a lens for understanding other material.