

Basics

Paraphrasing means repeating something using different words. In the course of your studies, you will read sections of text which have been paraphrased. You need to understand why the writer has paraphrased – for example, to avoid repetitive phrasing; to avoid using a direct quote; to restate something for emphasis using different words; to make something sound more formal; or to make something easier to understand. To understand this you need to learn to recognize different techniques the writer uses.

You have almost certainly come across paraphrasing in reading or listening comprehension questions (especially multiple-choice questions where the correct answer (a/b/c/d) is a paraphrase of something in the text).

The academic context

Paraphrasing is important in academic work because it is so common. Most academic writers use paraphrasing to summarize their own work or the ideas of others, or to explain something they have said using different words for greater clarity. As the reader, you need to know if you are looking at the main point or a paraphrase of it. Recognizing that something has been paraphrased helps you to build up a better picture of the text as a whole.

Learning to understand paraphrasing is a huge step towards using it yourself – something that you will almost certainly have to do as part of your academic writing (and possibly speaking too).

Key features

Paraphrasing can include elements of summarizing, and sometimes (though not always) the paraphrase is shorter than the original. To paraphrase effectively, a rich vocabulary is important so that you can:

- use synonyms/antonyms to replace adjectives, adverbs, verbs, nouns, etc.
- substitute regular verbs for phrasal verbs and vice versa
- reorder a sentence, such as when you change from active to passive and vice versa
- break a long sentence down into shorter ones, or turn shorter sentences into one long one
- use a different sentence structure, for example, beginning with a gerund
- use a set phrase in place of a longer phrase
make people understand what you want to say → convey a message
- change the form of a word, e.g. change a noun to a verb
give information → inform
- change a verb–adverb phrase to an adjective–noun phrase
communicate effectively → effective communication

It is not usually enough just to use one of the strategies above (e.g. just replace an adjective with a synonym), as the paraphrase will look too much like the original text. A good paraphrase will combine two or more of the above elements. You will sometimes need to ‘import’ words. Look at the example:

Original	Paraphrase
They preferred meeting face-to-face as it helped them communicate effectively.	They expressed a preference for meeting face-to-face in order to facilitate effective communication.

Notice that the paraphrase changes a verb (*preferred*) to a noun (*preference*) and a verb–adverb collocation (*communicate effectively*) to an adjective–noun collocation (*effective communication*). The paraphrase also needs to import two verbs: *expressed* and *facilitate*. The phrase *express a preference* also means the word *for* is needed. Finally, *as it helped them* is paraphrased as *in order to facilitate*.

Challenges / difficulties

You can only fully grasp paraphrasing if you understand the two (or more) different ways a writer expresses the same thing. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges here is to build up a very large vocabulary with alternative ways of expressing an idea.

How can I develop this skill?

The more you read, the more you will enrich your vocabulary. Pay attention when a writer is paraphrasing something. Look at the changes made and try to be analytical about them. Then make an effort to include them in your own written and spoken English. As you practise, you will improve.

Learning outcome

Understanding paraphrasing helps you to understand a text in depth. You will be better equipped to learn more from the texts you read. Although it is not our main focus here, this skill is extremely useful when it comes to producing your own work. For guidance on using paraphrasing in academic writing, see **Paraphrase**.

Theory to practice

Look at the highlighted words and phrases in text B. They are paraphrases of words/phrases in text A. Find the words/phrases in text A which the writer of text B has paraphrased.

A

In many ways, this preference for auditory processing is to be expected. In remote areas of the island, there are still large numbers of elderly women who didn't attend school, and thus never learnt to read or write. Their informal education consisted of the constant repetition of stories that their elders told after dinner. Nowadays, many of these senior citizens are able to recite the genealogy of each inhabitant of their village, or give detailed accounts of events that happened sixty years ago or more. A substantial number of villagers who are now in their fifties completed primary school but did not continue their education thereafter. Since much of their schooling involved learning passages of text by heart, a method that favours internal auditory processing, many of them are still able to recite lengthy sections of prose or poetry that they learnt at school.

B

It is not surprising that¹ the islanders prefer to process information as words or sounds.² Many old ladies³ are illiterate,⁴ but, thanks to hearing the same stories time after time,⁵ they can explain family relationships and narrate events from their youth⁶ in detail. Many middle-aged residents in rural areas⁷ attended primary school but left after that.⁸ As a considerable proportion of their education⁹ involved rote learning,¹⁰ many can still quote¹¹ long¹² sections of text from their primary school days.¹³

Ways to get more practice

Do the tasks on the Worksheet and focus on the exact changes that help a writer to paraphrase. In your own speaking and writing, practise rephrasing and explaining in different words (e.g. *In other words ... What I mean by this is ...*) and summarizing (e.g. *To sum up ... To recap ... In conclusion ...*).