

THE PARAPHRASE

A paraphrase is a restatement of someone else's ideas written in your own words. A paraphrase states fully and clearly the meaning of a complex piece of writing. Because a paraphrase often includes your interpretation of complicated phrases and ideas, it can actually be longer than the original. A paraphrase is used to clarify the meanings of poems, proverbs, legal documents, and any other writing that is symbolic or especially difficult.

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” by Robert Frost

Original

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower,
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
Nothing gold can stay.

Paraphrase

The first growth of spring is more gold in color than green. But this golden shade of green doesn't last very long. The first leaf is actually a blossom or a flower, but it remains for only a very short time. Then the buds and blossoms give way to full, green leaves. So day is taken away by the night. Nothing in nature--especially those things most beautiful--last forever.

THE PRÉCIS

A précis is perhaps the most useful kind of summary writing for general studying. A précis is a summary in your own words of something you have just read. You select only the most important ideas and combine them into clear, concise sentences. A précis of a paragraph for example, may be only one sentence long. In most cases your précis should be no more than one-third as long as the original. Follow the guidelines below whenever you need to write a summary of something you have read.

Guidelines for Writing a Précis

1. Skim the selection to get the overall meaning.
2. Reread the selection carefully, paying particular attention to key words and phrases. (Check the meaning of any words with which you are unfamiliar.)
3. List the major ideas on your own paper.
4. Quickly skim the selection a final time so that you have the overall meaning clearly in mind as you begin to write.
5. Write a summary of the major ideas, using your own words except for those “few” words in the original that cannot be changed. Keep the following points in mind as you write your précis:
 - a. Your opening (topic) sentence should be a clear statement of the main idea of the original.
 - b. Stick to the essential information -- names, dates, times, places, and similar facts are usually essential. Examples, detailed data, and adjectives are usually not essential.
 - c. Try to state each important idea in one clear sentence.
 - d. Arrange your ideas into the most logical order, and link your sentences with effective connecting words so that your précis becomes a complete paragraph in itself.
 - e. Use vivid, efficient words that keep the précis to no more than one-third the original's length.
 - f. Use a concluding sentence that ties your points together and brings your summary to an effective end.
6. Check your précis for accuracy and conciseness by rereading the original passage and comparing it thought for thought with your précis. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. Have I kept the original writer's point of view in my précis?
 - b. Have I cut or compressed the supporting details contained in the original?
 - c. Could another person get the main idea of the original selection by simply reading my précis?
7. Proofread your précis for mechanical errors and overall effectiveness. (Follow the same checklist or proofreading guidelines you use for your paragraph or essay writing.)

Why Paraphrase?

When Benjamin Franklin was a boy, he had to secure his education in large measure through self-teaching. One of his methods of study was to read a passage thoroughly, put the book aside, and rewrite the passage in his own words. Then he would compare his words with the original passage to see if he had interpreted it correctly without omitting anything of importance.

Abraham Lincoln employed a similar method of acquiring his education. "I can remember," he wrote, "going to my little bedroom, after hearing the neighbors talk of an evening with my father, and spending no small part of the night walking up and down, and trying to make out the exact meaning of some of their dark sayings...I was not satisfied until I had repeated it over and over, until I had put it in a language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend."

As men, both of these "boys" were noted for their ability to write so competently that their sentences form the backbone of any respectable book of quotations.

Note the following lines that could benefit from paraphrase:

1. "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." –Oscar Wilde
2. "Breed is stronger than pasture." –George Eliot
3. "Courage is grace under pressure." –Ernest Hemingway
4. "Doubt is what gets you an education." –Wilson Mizner
5. "The cat in gloves catches no mice." –Benjamin Franklin
6. "Money often costs too much." –Ralph Waldo Emerson
7. "These are the times that try men's souls." –Thomas Paine
8. "An intellectual is a person whose mind watches itself." –Albert Camus
9. "We are drowning in information and starving for knowledge." –Rutherford D. Rogers
10. "There never was a good war or a bad peace." –Benjamin Franklin
11. "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master." –Abraham Lincoln
12. "Applause waits on success." –Benjamin Franklin
13. "There is no little enemy." –Benjamin Franklin
14. "If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest." –Benjamin Franklin
15. "The ballot is stronger than the bullet." –Malcolm X
16. "Music is love in search of a word." –Sidney Lanier
17. "Computers are useless. They can only give you answers." –Pablo Picasso
18. "All the people like us are We, and everyone else is They." –Rudyard Kipling
19. "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." –Mao Tse-tung
20. "Not everybody trusts paintings but people believe photographs." –Ansel Adams
21. "One of the main causes of failure is giving up what you want most for what you want now."
–Jessie Ahroni
22. "Stay hungry. Stay foolish." –Steve Jobs
23. "All books are either dreams or swords." –Amy Lowell
24. "Not all those who wander are lost." –J. R. R. Tolkien
25. "Hate is too great a burden to bear." –Martin Luther King, Jr.
26. "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." –Gloria Steinem
27. "The hand is the cutting edge of the mind." –Jacob Bronowski
28. "Sometimes you're the windshield and sometimes you're the bug" --Dire Straits
29. "A nickel ain't worth a dime anymore." –Yogi Berra
30. "A plot is two dogs and one bone." –Robert Newton Peck
31. "Writers, like teeth, are divided into incisors and grinders." –Walter Bagehot
32. "Prose is architecture not interior decoration." –Ernest Hemingway
33. "Some books are to be tasted; others swallowed; and some few to be chewed and digested."
–Francis Bacon
34. "It is never too late to be what you might have been." –George Eliot
35. "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in denim and it looks like work."
–Thomas Edison
36. "The alphabet is hidden in the pen and everything is hidden in the alphabet." --Anonymous
37. "One man's religion is another man's mythology." –Sandra Effinger
38. "Education is its own reward and ignorance is its own punishment." – Sandra Effinger
39. "Great literature is not a one night stand." –Sandra Effinger
40. "Doneness counts." –Sandra Effinger

Paraphrasing A Poem

Definition: A paraphrase of a poem is a rewriting of the poem in simple and clear prose. A person paraphrasing a poem tries to use his or her own words (not the poet's) to restate what the speaker is saying. However, he or she also tries to include any important comparisons or images mentioned in the poem.

Read the stanza of poetry below and the two different paraphrases of this stanza. Then answer the questions about these paraphrases.

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.
(From "A Poison Tree" by William Blake)

Paraphrase A

The speaker tells us he felt angry at a friend and told him so. As a result, the speaker's anger disappeared. However, when he became angry at a foe, he hid his feelings. As time went on, this hidden anger became stronger.

Paraphrase B

The speaker says if you are angry at someone you like, you will get over it. But if you are angry at an enemy, you will just get madder and madder at him.

1. Writer B uses the word "you" in the paraphrase; Writer A does not. Explain what difference in meaning this creates.

2. What important idea from the poem does Writer B forget to mention in the paraphrase?

3. Writer B uses the words "someone you like" while Writer A says "a friend." B says "an enemy" where A says "a foe." Which writer has been more careful to write the paraphrase in his or her own words? _____

Activity: Write your own paraphrase of the stanza by William Blake, avoiding the errors made by both A and B.

Extensions: Select a poem of at least 14 lines to paraphrase.

Title _____ Poet _____