



Pass and Paraphrase

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For students entering scientific disciplines, the ability to write papers in English is no longer just an asset—it is a necessity. At the medical school where I teach in Japan, the chief requirement for tenure is the number of publications one has in esteemed journals, and publications in Japanese have little value. Young doctors are simply mad to publish, yet most have received little instruction in academic English writing.

One skill that I have found that students badly need is the ability to paraphrase. It is not unusual to read papers written by students or colleagues with whole paragraphs from other sources pasted into their own writing. Simply warning students about the dangers of plagiarism is not enough. We tend to forget how hard it is to learn how to paraphrase or summarize another writer's ideas, even in one's first language. Furthermore, the boundaries and guidelines for borrowing and documenting another writer's words or ideas are often poorly understood. Students need instruction in how to paraphrase well. The activity described below has worked well for my students and may be useful for ESL/EFL students in other university level English writing classes as well.

Preparation

In the class before the main lesson, take a few minutes to introduce the notions of plagiarism and paraphrasing. Do this briefly and simply to avoid overwhelming students. Explain that plagiarism generally means the copying of someone's words without giving that person credit and that it is considered a form of stealing. However, paraphrasing, which means to use different words (one's own words) to express what an author has written or said, is permitted, so long as we properly acknowledge the source of the information. (The internet has a wealth of information about plagiarism including this excellent site from Clemson University's graduate school: <http://www.grad.clemson.edu/plagiarism.php>.)

Next, write on the board a few paraphrasing tips for discussion. They may include the following:

1. Do not use more than two or three words in a row from the original text.
2. Think of synonyms for key words (for example, *frightened* for *scared*).
3. Rearrange the writing, shaping sentences differently to reflect your voice.
4. Cut information that is not important or relevant for your audience.

The list of points can be expanded or simplified as appropriate for your class.

Finally, have students practice paraphrasing some sentences that you write on the board, starting with simple ones and moving to more complex.

For homework, ask students to write a short paragraph of 5-7 sentences that will be used for the paraphrasing activity in the next class. Suggest topics that do not entail too much challenging vocabulary. For example, I often ask students to write about a process, such as how to prepare a dish or how they get to school each day. A process topic lends itself well to paraphrasing tasks, and since science majors must often describe processes in the introduction or methods parts of their academic papers, it is a realistic task. Tell students to write or type their paragraph on a sheet of regular sized paper, folded into thirds, fitting their paragraph into the space above the first fold. [They will use the other two thirds of the page in the next class.]

Paraphrase Activity Procedure

1. Be sure all students have done their homework. Those who did not finish cannot participate or must work with another student.
2. Have students form groups of three, but sitting with their backs to each other, the opposite of how they would normally sit in groups.
3. Instruct students to pass their homework paragraphs clockwise or counterclockwise within their groups.
4. Give students ten minutes to paraphrase their partner's paragraph using the middle third of the page. Remind them to try to find new ways to express what their partner has written, using different words and shaping or combining sentences differently.
5. When ten minutes have passed, tell students to fold the papers to hide the original paragraph and then pass the paper to the next group member.
6. Then, have students try to paraphrase the second paragraph in the remaining space, without looking at the first.
7. When time is up, have students pass the papers back to the original writer. Let them unfold the top third and see how their paragraph has mutated through rewriting. Give them some time to talk to each other about the changes and to ask questions.

Caveats and Extension

1. In a subsequent class, use an overhead transparency to show students some of the best examples of paraphrase. Keep this lively and fun. Paraphrasing is tedious

work, and dwelling too much on faults will discourage students about their writing ability.

2. In lower-level classes, students may need more than ten minutes to write, and some students will always finish writing more quickly than others. I try to be as strict as possible with the time limit, however, to keep the task moving.
3. If your students are keeping a journal, they can use it to practice paraphrasing. Ask them to find passages that interest them in newspapers, magazines, or on the internet, paste them into their journals, and then try to rewrite the passages in their own words. Alternatively, they could try rewriting a journal entry that they wrote several days or weeks earlier.
4. Advanced students can be encouraged to work with multiple sources and to practice giving credit to them using phrase such as “According to . . .”
5. Depending on the level and background of the students, you may want to introduce summary writing before or after your lessons on paraphrasing. You can begin by writing a summary paragraph together. For example, you might summarize the plot of a popular movie or a familiar folktale. Ask students to try to distill their paragraph into 2-3 sentences, and then just one. This forces them to recognize the essential information in a passage, to be concise, and to see that there are many ways to express the same idea. Then, they can try their hand at summarizing a written passage.

Conclusion

Paraphrasing is a challenging but essential skill in academic writing. It takes native speakers several years or more to become skilled at paraphrasing, and there is no reason to expect that second language learners will be able to do it well with just a few words of stern advice. The key is to integrate paraphrasing into a course so that students receive as much practice as possible over time. It is my hope that the activity described here will help other teachers to do just that.

About the Author

Ian Willey has an MA in TESL from Kent State University. He has been teaching in Japan for 10 years, at universities in Hiroshima, Tokyo, and Kagawa. Presently he is a lecturer at Kagawa University. His primary professional interest is helping students become better writers.