
Introduction

Paraphrasing skills are necessary for international English examinations, especially for the writing tasks of the *Cambridge English: Advanced* and *Proficiency*, and to a lesser degree, the *IELTS* test. The CEFR writing assessment guide states that at C2 level, candidates should be able to “*summarise information from different sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation of the overall result.*” This means that simply lifting content from the original text would not show our real understanding or command of English. If the lifting is heavy, we could be penalised under language marks as well.

The same set of skills is equally important in academic writing at university level, where students are required to incorporate materials from other sources to offer concrete support, evidence and exemplification without quoting verbatim. By paraphrasing, we can avoid plagiarism and also improve our writing style.

Occasionally, students tend to paraphrase using word-for-word substitution, mainly through *Sentence Transformation* practice, a part of the *Use of English* paper in Cambridge English exams. While these types of exercises involve some paraphrasing skills, they are aimed at testing grammar and vocabulary with little consideration of style, register and tone of the source. Therefore, we should be aware of different strategies or techniques of paraphrasing so that in certain cases when word-for-word substitution does not work, we can explore other strategies.

What are the techniques of paraphrasing?

In **semantic paraphrasing**, the source text is changed at the word-level while the original meaning of the sentence or phrase is retained. Semantics refers to vocabulary, meaning, word formation and constructing sentences, phrases or clauses that make sense. For example:

- a Using synonyms or word-for-word substitution
- b Using antonyms (with appropriate negation markers)
- c Explaining or defining a word (or words) with a phrase
- d Summation (often useful for example-driven texts; may involve inferences)
- e Changing word forms: using affixation, conversion, back-formation, nominalisation, and other aspects of word formation
- f Generalisation or making the abstract more concrete

In **syntactic paraphrasing**, the word order and sentence structure are changed, such as from active to passive voice, combining and breaking up sentences. Syntax refers to grammatical structures, patterns or rules for the formation of sentences and clauses.

Note that when the syntax is changed, the words must also change in a way that the original meaning of the sentence or phrase is retained. Otherwise, the paraphrased version could become ungrammatical and unnatural.

When paraphrasing, our mind has to be flexible. At times, a combination of semantic and syntactic paraphrasing needs to be utilised with awareness of style, register and collocations.

How can we practise paraphrasing?

Most students struggle to put the author's ideas in their own words without changing the original meaning. That is, they usually do not know where to begin as they are still learning the language; they may end up changing a word here or there with the result being a paraphrase akin to plagiarism.

The parts of speech hierarchy

Verbs offer various possibilities for word substitution, next adjectives, and lastly, nouns (general vs. specific). First, students can work in small groups to generate synonyms for the chosen vocabulary. Then, they can write synonyms in a vocabulary journal or create flashcards (hard copy or online). Finally, the students and teacher can go over the list of word substitutions. It is important to address the issue of context in this activity because students often use the first dictionary definition without consideration of context. Also, an important aspect of this exercise is to promote students' awareness of choosing the appropriate meaning of a word based on the specific text.

Sentence re-structuring

Students should understand various sentence structures (simple, compound, complex, compound-complex) prior to this activity. First, teachers can model the analysis and re-structuring of original information. Then, students analyse the sentence structure of the source material and attempt to write their own sentences with a different sentence structure, either with the help of sentence starters/replacements or on their own.

Plagiarism tutorials

Addressing how to avoid plagiarism includes the teaching of essential elements of an effective paraphrase. Given that an 'effective paraphrase' requires a conceptual and cultural understanding of plagiarism, scaffolding will be necessary.

Paraphrase activities should firstly focus on using parts of speech as a hierarchy to change language and meaning, and then move on to revise the author's original sentence structure using other sentence types.