

Paraphrasing for Comprehension

Paraphrasing is commonly thought of as copying information from a text source and changing a few words. That process rarely results in retention of learning because the copying act can be done almost automatically and without much conscious thought. If the purpose of paraphrasing is to give students opportunities to get a deeper understanding of the text, to make connections to what they already know, and to enhance remembering, then a much more systematic process must be followed.

Effective paraphrasing incorporates reading, writing, listening, and speaking, thereby activating the brain's frontal lobe and leading to a fuller comprehension of the course material. It can be used in all content areas and with students in the upper elementary grades and beyond, and it can help students learn from many different types of texts, including fiction and nonfiction.

The process encourages active student participation; provides for mental, oral, and written rehearsal of newly learned material; and enhances comprehension and retention. At the same time, it develops reading, communication, and creative skills (Fisk & Hurst, 2003). See the box on this page for the guidelines and steps for using paraphrasing successfully in the classroom.

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Guidelines:

This strategy is appropriate for upper elementary grades and beyond. It can be used in all content areas and with all types of texts, including fiction and nonfiction. It is effective because it uses all modes of communication: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The process encourages active student participation; provides for mental, oral, and written rehearsal of newly learned material; and enhances comprehension and retention. At the same time, it develops reading, communication, and creative skills.

A good paraphrase must convey the original meaning of the author but in the student's own words and phrasing. The voice of the author also should be maintained. If the original work is humorous, satirical, sarcastic, or melancholy, the paraphrase should be also. Students should therefore identify the author's meaning and voice before they start writing.

The teacher should explain the purpose and benefits of paraphrasing. Students already do some paraphrasing when they take notes in class, write a book report, or give a speech. Outside examples can include telling someone about a trip taken, or a news reporter summarizing an interview.

Steps:

This general scheme has four steps. Modify the steps as appropriate for the age level of the students and the nature of the material being read.

1. *First reading and discussion.* Read aloud the text to be paraphrased while students follow along in their own texts. Have the students suggest possible definitions for any unfamiliar words. After clarifying the vocabulary, ask the students to identify the main idea and the author's tone.

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2. *Second reading and note taking.* Students read the text on their own and take detailed notes when they finish a paragraph. The notes should capture the main idea and supporting details, but should be in the students' own words. Students may want to use a thesaurus to help them with difficult or technical words.
3. *Written paraphrase.* When finished with the note taking, the students put the original text away so it will not influence the next step. Using only their notes, the students write their paraphrased version that communicates the main ideas with the same voice of the original text.
4. *Sharing paraphrases.* When the paraphrases are completed, the students form pairs and compare the similarities and differences between their respective paraphrases. They are also asked to decide how the author's voice is communicated in their versions.

SOURCE: Adapted from Fisk and Hurst (2003).

Reading Aloud to the Class

Consider reading certain parts of the text to the class, especially those parts that use difficult or highly technical words or describe complex situations. Remember that many students can understand something when they hear it even though they may not be able to read about it themselves. This is particularly true for English language learners who often understand oral language much better than written words. Reading aloud can also be used to make connections between texts, to develop background information, or for enjoyment. Where appropriate, the oral reading can be done by other students, school volunteers, or parents. Another option is for you or a student to record certain text sections and have the recordings available for student use in the school's media center.

Teachers sometimes underestimate the effectiveness of read-aloud activities. Yet research studies show that, when used on a regular basis, especially in the elementary grades, they can boost students' comprehension as well as increase the students' knowledge and vocabulary in the content areas (Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008).

Rewriting Content Material

Some course materials may have a particularly high level of reading difficulty. Rewriting the material at a reading level closer to that of the students who are having problems allows those students to gain confidence in their ability to understand the content despite their reading difficulties. Another possibility is to have students who do understand the course material rewrite it for their classmates. Students often rewrite content in language that their peers are more likely to understand. This approach reinforces both reading and writing skills. Of course, the teacher should check these rewrites for accuracy.