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One of the keys to good note taking—and very helpful in avoiding plagiarism, as well as *actually learning* something about your topic—is learning how to paraphrase effectively. It’s often been said that, if you cannot explain an idea to someone else *in your own words*, then, you don’t really understand the idea.

Paraphrasing makes certain that you *do* understand the ideas you’re learning. Taking the ideas and restating them in your own words is also a very effective way to make certain that you’ll remember the information even after you’ve written the paper and turned it in.

Direct quotation is important when you *must* present the material in exactly the same way your source does, and summary is useful in presenting a large block of information, but paraphrase is the most effective means of learning and then demonstrating what you’ve learned.

Remember, however, that you will still need to cite the source that gave you the information, regardless of whether you paraphrase, summarize, or use direct quotations.

Here’s the original text, from Ella’s United States history textbook:

Jamestown was beset by many difficulties as early settlers struggled to tame the land and deal with natives. “Share-holders” funded the venture and remained in England, expecting the settlers—generally poor farmers and tradesmen and their families—to quickly turn a profit from the bounty of natural resources in the “New World.”

Early on, however, it was all the settlers could do to keep from starving to death. With no immediate profit to be had, and settlers struggling merely to stay alive, many questioned whether the venture would survive, let alone become a model for many (though not all) future settlements in the region.

And here's Ella's first attempt at a paraphrase:

*Jamestown was beset by many troubles. Early settlers struggled to tame the land and also deal with the aboriginal natives. The investors, who had funded the venture and remained in England, expected the settlers (who were mostly poor farmers and tradesmen and their families) to make a quick profit from the bountiful natural resources of the "New World."*

*It took all of the settlers' time and energy simply to keep from starving to death. Seeing no immediate profit, and settlers struggling merely to survive, many people questioned whether the venture would survive, let alone become a model for future settlements.*

**This is an unacceptable paraphrase and would count as plagiarism!**

Ella has only changed around a few words and phrases. The entire passage is still nothing more than her source's words and ideas.

If she is going to use this passage in her paper, she is going to have to cite the source in the body of her paper. (See section 30: "Why, when, and how do I cite my sources?")

**Ella, however, is still early enough in her timeline to show her first notes to her teacher. Being warned that her paraphrase is not sufficient, she tries again:**

*From the beginning, the settlers faced difficulties more severe than they had apparently foreseen. Clearing land for fortification, housing, and farming proved difficult, and early relations with the natives were doubtful, the natives often being hostile to the settlers. The investors, whose sole interest was quick profit from the exploitation of America's abundant natural resources, had stayed in England, so they were not witness to, nor part of, the struggle to survive.*

*When these shareholders realized the possibility of losing their investments and recognized the severe hardship of trying merely to survive, they questioned the advisability of future settlements.*

This paraphrase is acceptable because it accurately conveys the information, largely in Ella's own words. In addition to rephrasing the information from her source, Ella has also chosen words and sentence structures that indicate her understanding of the information she is processing.

*Note, however, that Ella should still cite the source of this information in the body of her paper. (See section 30: "Why, when, and how do I cite my sources?")*

## EXERCISE THREE

## EVALUATING PARAPHRASES

Now, look at a few of Rob's attempts to paraphrase passages from his sources. In the spaces provided, state whether the paraphrase is acceptable or unacceptable. If it is unacceptable, explain why. Then, offer a better paraphrase and explain why yours is better.

**Rob**

**Focused Topic:** How the development of the railroads increased the movement west and changed the nature of those who went.

**Thesis:** Without the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, the United States of America could quite possibly have developed east-west differences even more significant than those that divided the northern and southern states.

**Original Text of Rob's Source:**

The eastern United States had become markedly English with a strong French influence. Urbanites and those who lived in small towns witnessed the evolution of an aristocracy, especially among the cash-wealthy merchants and service professionals, whose houses and gardens began to imitate the manor homes of the British and French aristocracy. Lace, satin, velvet, polished wood and vast quantities of glass proclaimed the status of the persons whose homes they adorned. Paved streets were straight and lined with trees, and the community met and mingled on front porches and verandahs where news was spread and gossip shared. From the coldest sea-coast village of Maine to the hottest and most humid Georgia plantation, the aspirations for "the good life" and the accoutrements of that life were more similar than different.

### Rob's paraphrase:

*The east had become very English and French. Those who lived in cities and small towns saw the development of an upper class among wealthy merchants, whose houses and yards looked like the manor homes of the aristocracy of England and France. Materials like lace, satin, velvet, wood, glass announced the wealth of the people who lived in the houses decorated like that. Streets were paved and straight, and tree-lined. Front porches and verandahs were where the community gathered and where news and gossip were shared. From Maine to Georgia plantation, what people considered "the good life" was very similar.*

**Is Rob's paraphrase acceptable? [No]**

**Why or why not?**

[It appears that all Rob has done is copy and paste the material from his source and then make a few superficial changes in word choice and sentence structure. "Urbanites and those who lived in small towns" becomes "Those who lived in cities and small towns," and so on. The organization pattern, even the flow from sentence to sentence is identical in the original and Rob's inadequate paraphrase.]

**If Rob's paraphrase is unacceptable, provide an example of what would make it better:**

[NOTE: Student answers will vary, but must be complete, accurate and original. Certainly, some of the word choices will be similar (verandah, list of building and decorative materials), but the paraphrase should sound like the student, not like the student imitating the source—or blatantly copying from the source.]

**Why is your paraphrase better?**

[NOTE: Student answers will vary, but must demonstrate that the student is aware that a paraphrase is more than merely parroting what the source has already said. In order to be effective, the paraphrase must indicate the student's understanding of the passage, what the student has seen as most significant, how the student understands allusions, similes, metaphors, etc.]

*EXERCISE FOUR:*

PRACTICING PARAPHRASE

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Now, apply to your own research paper what you've learned and practiced. Select a key passage from one of your more important sources and paraphrase it. Then, share the original passage and your paraphrase with a partner and have him/her answer the following questions:

*Is this paraphrase acceptable?*

*Why or why not?*

*What could be done to make this paraphrase better?*

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**Why or why not?**

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**Why is your paraphrase better?**

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