

Paraphrasing for comprehension

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The middle school classroom is humming with conversation. Students are paired off around the room, reading each other's papers and comparing their ideas. They are genuinely engaged, and their conversation is thoughtful. "I thought he sounded mad when he wrote about everything the colonists had tried to do to reason with Britain," observes one student. "Me, too. But I also thought he was sad that everything they tried had failed," responds another. The students are referring to Patrick Henry's famous "Give Me Liberty, or Give Me Death" speech that their teacher had read to them. Not only have the students heard the speech, but they also have read it, taken notes on it, and paraphrased it in their own words. Now they are discussing the main ideas, as well as the author's voice. As is our goal as teachers, the students clearly understand what they have read by using "paraphrasing for comprehension," which includes reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

When we think of the word *paraphrasing*, sometimes what comes to mind is students copying from the encyclopedia and changing a few words here and there when writing a class report. But when students are taught a technique for how to paraphrase text, paraphrasing can strengthen comprehension of both fiction and nonfiction. While paraphrasing has traditionally been viewed as a student study skill (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984), it can also be useful to promote reading comprehension skills (Harris & Sipay, 1990; Katims & Harris, 1997; Shugarman & Hurst, 1986). In our efforts to help students better comprehend text, we have found paraphrasing for comprehension to be an excellent tool for reinforcing reading skills such as

identifying the main ideas, finding supporting details, and identifying the author's voice.

One of the reasons paraphrasing for comprehension works so well is because it integrates all modes of communication—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—which leads to a deeper understanding of the text. The tie between reading and writing has long been established as an effective means of strengthening comprehension. Vacca and Vacca (1999) stated, "Students who experience the integration of writing and reading are likely to learn more content, to understand it better, and to remember it longer" (p. 262). They further contended,

When teachers integrate writing and reading, they help students use writing to think about what they will read and to understand what they have read.... It is also one of the most effective ways for students to understand something they have read. (p. 261)

Listening and speaking, or social interaction, have also been found to aid in comprehension. Almasi and Gambrell (1997) found that "providing opportunities for students to interact with one another and to challenge others' ideas during discussions supports higher-level thinking" (p. 151). Harvey and Goudvis (2000) contended that "opportunities for peer discussion and response build community and enhance understanding for all kids in the class" (p. 30).

When introducing the concept of paraphrasing to students, it is important for teachers to first discuss the meaning. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines paraphrasing as the "restatement of a text, passage or work giving the meaning in another form." Paraphrasing is not intended to be a word-for-word

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translation, but rather a genuine rewriting, concentrating on expressing main ideas and supporting evidence in the student's own words. This is sometimes a difficult concept for students, who will tend to approach a rewrite in a sentence-by-sentence manner. But a good paraphrase will convey the meaning of the original document using the students' own vocabulary and phrasing.

The voice of the original author is maintained in a good paraphrase. If the original text is written with passion, the paraphrase should also be passionate. If the text is humorous, the paraphrase should be, too. Other voices that might be identified in a text could include sarcasm, satire, persuasion, or melancholy. It is important for students to identify the author's voice before beginning the process of paraphrasing. This process helps students identify with the characters in their reading. As Harris and Sipay (1990) observed, "Being able to restate another's thoughts in one's own language clearly and unambiguously is a crucial test of whether the thoughts were understood" (p. 537).

Students will benefit from knowing why paraphrasing is helpful and when they will use it. A useful discussion topic before implementing the paraphrasing strategy might be to ask students, "Where have you seen people restate someone else's ideas at school?" Student responses to this question might include instances such as taking notes for a research paper, writing a book report, giving a speech, and speaking at a student council meeting. When asked the same question for activities outside of school, students might give examples such as telling your boss about a meeting you attended and a reporter describing an interview. Helping students see practical applications of accurately restating another person's ideas will motivate them to use paraphrasing.

Paraphrasing for comprehension procedures

In our paraphrasing for comprehension strategy, we use four simple steps: (a) initial reading of text followed by discussion, (b) second reading of text accompanied by note-taking, (c) written paraphrasing, and (d) sharing of the written paraphrase. These steps are described as they were implemented in two class periods during a study of the

American Revolution, using the text of Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty, or Give Me Death" speech from March 1775 (can be found at <http://law.ou.edu.hist/henry/html>).

1. Initial reading and discussion

The teacher distributed copies of Patrick Henry's speech and explained its historical context: Patrick Henry was a member of the Virginia colonial legislature at a time when colonists were protesting unfair British policies. The teacher asked students to read silently while she read the speech aloud. After this initial reading, the teacher asked students to suggest definitions for unfamiliar words (e.g., *arduous* and *temporal*). After the vocabulary was clarified, the teacher asked students to identify the main idea of the speech. The students decided that the main idea was that Patrick Henry believed the colonists must go to war against Britain because all of their other protest methods had failed. Finally, the teacher asked the students to describe the tone of the speech, or the author's voice. Students described the speech as "heartfelt," "trying to convince," and "emotional." The purposes of the initial reading and discussion were for the students to become familiar with the text, to identify the main idea, and to examine the author's voice.

2. Second reading with note-taking

The teacher instructed the students to read the speech again, on their own. This time, students were asked to take careful, detailed notes from each paragraph in their own words. They were instructed to look for the main ideas and supporting details. They were to avoid using the same vocabulary as Patrick Henry used, but to find different words to express his ideas. The teacher suggested that the students read an entire paragraph, and then take notes on the main ideas of the paragraph, rather than taking notes sentence by sentence. Some students asked to use a thesaurus while taking notes.

3. Written paraphrase

When students were finished taking notes, they were instructed to turn in their copies of the speech so that they would not rely on the wording of the original text. From their notes, students then proceeded to write their paraphrased version of the speech. The teacher reminded students that their task was twofold: to convey the main ideas of the

Samples of student paraphrasing

Paragraph from Patrick's Henry's speech

"Mr. President, it is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of the siren till she transforms us into beasts. Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? Are we disposed to be of the numbers of those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth, to know the worst, and to provide for it."

Paragraph from *Charlotte's Web*

"'One day just like another,' he groaned. 'I'm very young, I have no real friend here in the barn, it's going to rain all morning and all afternoon, and Fern won't come in such bad weather. Oh, honestly!' And Wilbur was crying again, for the second time in two days." (p. 27)

Middle school student's paraphrasing of the paragraph

"Mr. President, it is natural to have hope. We pretend to ignore the truth when it is painful and we always tend to look for the easy way out even though it will end up costing us more in the future. Our leaders must recognize the difficult situation and follow the course to liberty. We must not act like monkeys who 'hear no evil, speak no evil, or see no evil.' No matter what the consequences I must know the truth, regardless how bad and prepare for its effects."

Elementary student's paraphrasing of the paragraph

"'I'm sad because I don't have any friends. I'm mad because it's raining. I bet Fern won't come today because of the rain.' He cried again for the second time."

speech and to communicate the ideas with the same voice as the original text.

4. *Sharing paraphrases*

When students had completed their paraphrases, they formed pairs and exchanged papers for a time of peer reflection. Students were asked to discuss the following questions: How are the two paraphrases similar? How are they different? How is the author's voice communicated in the two papers?

The Figure contains two samples of student paraphrasing. The first is an example of a middle school student's paraphrase of a paragraph from Patrick Henry's speech, and the second is from an elementary student's paraphrase from *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952).

Benefits for comprehension

Paraphrasing for comprehension can be used in upper elementary, middle school, high school, and at the college level to help students learn from many diverse types of texts, including fiction and nonfiction. This strategy not only gives students a reason to read but also encourages them "to keep reading and keep learning together" (Wilkinson, 2002, p. 2). When they use a strategy that incorpo-

rates all modes of communication including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, students are more likely to understand and remember the material. Paraphrasing for comprehension incorporates four ways for students to interact with the text: (1) they hear it read aloud, (2) they read it themselves and take notes, (3) they rewrite it in their own words, and (4) they talk about their paraphrased text with their peers. Once students have experienced the text through these various modes, they have a good understanding of it. While paraphrasing for comprehension is not a strategy that needs to be used in every reading situation, it is an effective tool to add to our repertoire of classroom practices intended to increase students' comprehension of text.

Shugarman and Hurst (1986) found that "paraphrase writing...is a powerful method that teachers can use to improve content understanding, learning, and interest while developing reading, content, communication, and creative skills" (p. 398). Paraphrasing for comprehension is an effective reading strategy that helps students process and comprehend what they are reading and learning.

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