How to Paraphrase Effectively

Introduction

"Paraphrase" is a verb which means to re-write a phrase or sentence with the same meaning but using different words. Paraphrasing is a very important skill for most English tests, including TOEFL iBT, IELTS and TOEIC Speaking and Writing. In TOEFL iBT, for instance, paraphrasing is an important skill in the reading section, in the listening section and, above all, in the speaking and writing sections of the test.

Here is a quick example of paraphrasing using a phrase from the paragraph above:

> **1. "Paraphrasing is a very important skill for most English tests."**

> **2. "For many tests of English, being skilful at paraphrasing is extremely important."**

Notice how the paraphrased version (sentence 2) changes some vocabulary (e.g., "extremely" for "very"), changes the word order (e.g., "tests of English" for "English tests") and changes the grammar (e.g., "being skilful at paraphrasing…" for "Paraphrasing is a very important skill…") These are the three main ways to paraphrase and by combining all of these methods, you can achieve clear and accurate paraphrased sentences. The next sections will look at these methods in more detail.

Paraphrasing Method 1: Use Different Vocabulary with the Same Meaning

Most students try to use this method, but actually it can be difficult to use. The reason is that although English has many **synonyms** such as 'large' or 'big', it is unusual for these words to have exactly the same meaning. So, if you try to use a lot of synonyms when you paraphrase, you might produce sentences that are not natural English. Unnatural sentences are likely to reduce your score more than small mistakes because the reader may not understand what you are trying to say.

For example, look at this original sentence and two paraphrased **equivalents**:

> **1. "It can be difficult to choose a suitable place to study English."**

> **2. "It is often a challenge to pick up (x) a relevant (x) school to learn English."**
> **3. "It is sometimes hard to select an appropriate place to learn English."**

For non-native speakers, these three sentences might look like they have the same meaning. For native speakers, however, sentence 2 is unnatural. The first problem is "pick up". This expression does NOT have the same meaning as "choose", so this part of the paraphrased sentence is actually wrong. The second problem is the word "relevant". In some cases, "relevant" and "suitable" are good synonyms but in this example they are not

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close in meaning at all. Sentence 3 is a much better paraphrase of sentence 1 because all of the words have the same meaning.

The best advice is to follow the "100% rule" for using synonyms: only use a synonym for a word if you are 100% certain that the new word has 100% the same meaning as the original word. If you are less than 100% certain, keep the same word and use either method two or method three to paraphrase your sentence.

Paraphrasing Method 2: Change the Order of Words

Changing the word order of a phrase or sentence is usually safer than using synonyms because the words are the same, so the meaning must be the same. However, it is not always easy to decide which words to move or to decide to which position the words should be moved Also, when you move a word you might need to change some other words, add some other words or cut some other words to **ensure** that the new sentence is grammatically correct. Here are two suggestions for how to change the word order without making errors:

a. If the original sentence has two or more clauses, change the order of the **clauses**.

>   1. "**If they have some help, most people can paraphrase effectively. However, practice is important** because **paraphrasing is difficult.**"

>   2. "**Most people can paraphrase effectively, if they have some help. Paraphrasing is difficult, however,** so **practice is important.**"

b. If the original sentence has an adjective and noun, change the adjective into a relative clause.

>   1. "**Writing essays can be a challenging task.**"

>   2. "**Writing essays can be a task which is challenging.**"

Paraphrasing Method 3: Use Different Grammar

It sounds very difficult to use different grammar, but actually it is easier than changing vocabulary. In addition, if you change the grammar and make an error, usually the reader will understand what you mean. However, if you change the vocabulary and make an error, often the reader will not understand what you mean. So, although changing the grammar has some advantages, it is still not easy and you should practice it as often as possible. Here are two suggestions for how to change the grammar without making errors:

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a. Change some of the words in the original sentence into different **parts of speech** (you will often need to change the word order and some other words, too).

      1. "The most effective way **to build** your English skill is to **study regularly**."

      2. "The most effective way **of building** your English skill is to **do studying on a regular basis**."

b. If the original sentence is in the active voice, change it to passive **or vice versa**.

      1. "To improve English, you **should learn** new vocabulary on a daily basis."

      2. "To improve English, new vocabulary **should be learned** on a daily basis"

Further Practice

By using the methods and ideas given in this article, you should be able to improve your paraphrasing skill. In tests like IELTS and TOEFL iBT you will often need to paraphrase quickly, so you need to practice regularly if you are going to get better and faster. Start by practicing each method individually and then begin combining the methods until you are comfortable at using all three of them.

If you want to see more examples of paraphrasing, one of the best ideas is to compare two news articles about a current event in two different newspapers. The stories will contain most of the same details, but the sentences will be different. By comparing the sentences and paragraphs you will get more ideas about how to paraphrase and see some real examples. Newspaper websites are often a good place to see two different articles without paying for two different newspapers.

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Useful Words

The following list defines some of the difficult words used in this article.

A **synonym** is a word or phrase that has almost the same meaning as another word or phrase. For example, 'smart', 'clever' and 'intelligent' are all synonyms because they have almost the same meaning.

If two things are **equivalent**, they are equal or almost equal to each other although they might be in different places. For example, the British 'prime minister' is equivalent to the United States 'president' because both the 'prime minister' and 'president' are the most powerful politicians in their country.

If somebody **ensures** something, the person makes sure that something is correct or true or OK. For example, if I am going on a trip, I will check my pocket to ensure that I have my passport.

A **clause** is a grammar word that describes part of a sentence that contains a subject and a verb. Most clauses also contain an object or subject complement. Some clauses are 'reduced' which means that subject (and sometimes the auxiliary verb) are omitted.

The phrase **part of speech** is used to describe the different types of words that are used in English. For example, 'noun', 'verb', 'adjective' and 'adverb' are four common parts of speech.

The expression **(and/or) vice versa** is used to indicate that the opposite of something which was just mentioned is also true. For example, 'If the book is on the shelf, put it in the box and vice versa' means 'If the book is on the shelf, put it in the box and if the book is in the box, put it on the shelf.'

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