Paraphrasing and Summarizing

One of the more difficult tasks students encounter when they compose a rough draft is successfully incorporating borrowed material into their papers. Step 7 reviews the necessary skills of paraphrasing, summarizing, and using direct quotations. It also provides instruction on the correct format for parenthetical citations.

Paraphrasing Rules

Most of the borrowed material used in a paper should be paraphrased. This means the student rewrites or restates the person's original ideas **in his/her own words**. Keep in mind the following rules:

Rule 1. Understand. Have a thorough understanding of the passage before paraphrasing it. Note key words and phrases, looking up definitions for any unfamiliar terms.

Rule 2. Clarify and simplify. Clarify and simplify in the paraphrase.

Rule 3. Retain the meaning. Retain the exact meaning of the original.

Rule 4. Maintain the form. Maintain approximately the same length, order of ideas, tone, and message. Do not use the same words and phrases except for the few that cannot be changed because they have no adequate synonyms or because a specific word is essential to the meaning of the passage.

Rule 5. Personalize the style. Develop and maintain a personal writing style throughout the paper, even when restating others' ideas, attitudes, and beliefs.

Rule 6. Provide citations. Provide in-text citations for all paraphrased material.

Read the following paragraph from page 140 of Charles C. Mann's book *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, in which he describes the reaction of Cortez and his soldiers to their first sight of the capital city of the Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlan. Then examine both of the proposed paraphrases and decide which one is acceptable and why.

Example

Original:

> Tenochtitlan dazzled its invaders—it was bigger than Paris, Europe's greatest metropolis. The Spaniards gawped like yokels at the wide streets, ornately carved buildings, and markets bright with goods from hundreds of miles away. Boats flitted like butterflies around the three grand causeways that linked Tenochtitlan to the mainland. Long aqueducts conveyed water from the distant mountains across the lake and into the city. Even more astounding than the great temples and immense banners and colorful promenades were the botanical gardens—none existed in Europe. The same novelty attended the force of a thousand men that kept the crowded streets immaculate. (Streets that weren't ankle-deep in sewage! The conquistadors had never conceived of such a thing.)

Brandon's version:

The Conquistadors were astonished by what they saw in Tenochtitlan. The city was bigger than Paris, and it boasted wide streets, busy markets, and beautiful buildings. Huge causeways had been built for easy access to the mainland, and aqueducts brought fresh water into the city. In addition to these marvels, Cortez and his soldiers discovered things that were unheard of in Europe, including botanical gardens and sanitary living conditions maintained by public workers (Mann 140).

Alex's version:

Cortez and his men were amazed by Tenochtitlan. It was bigger than Paris, Europe's largest metropolis. The Spaniards were awed by its wide streets, ornately carved buildings, and markets with goods from hundreds of miles away. Three causeways connected the city to the mainland, and long aqueducts brought water from faraway mountains. The Conquistadtors were also astounded by the botanical gardens, which did not exist in Europe, as well as the group of 1,000 men who kept the streets clean (Mann 140).

When comparing Alex's and Brandon's paraphrasing, notice that Alex repeated many of the words of the original, using synonyms or slightly different forms: connected/linked, brought/conveyed, astounded/astounding. Alex's paraphrase also repeats exact phrases like "wide streets, ornately carved buildings, and markets" and "It was bigger than Paris, Europe's largest metropolis."

Practice

After reviewing the rules, try paraphrasing the following paragraph about the Botocudo, a group of South American Indians, from page 152 of the same book.

Original:

The Botocudo were an indigenous group that lived a few hundred miles north of what is now Rio de Janeiro. (The name comes from *botoque*, the derogatory Portuguese term for the big wooden discs that the Botocudo inserted in their lower lips and earlobes, distending them outward.) Although apparently never numerous, they resisted conquest so successfully that in 1801 the Portuguese colonial government formally launched a "just war against the cannibalistic Botocudo." There followed a century of intermittent strife, which slowly drove the Botocudo to extinction.

Summarizing Rules

A summary is a shortened version of a paraphrase. It retains the original writer's main idea and point of view but condenses the material. Like the paraphrase, it uses the writer's own words. Here are the rules:

Rule 1. Read the passage, paying attention to keywords, looking up definitions for any unfamiliar terms.

Rule 2. Restate the main facts and ideas, keeping the order.

Rule 3. Include essential information, but omit descriptive details, examples, illustrations, analogies, and anecdotes.

Rule 4. Try to shrink the passage to about one-third the length of the original.

Rule 5. Provide a parenthetical citation for the material being summarized.

Read the following excerpt from pages 7-8 in the introduction to *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science* by Natalie Angier, and then compare the two summaries that follow. Do they convey the main idea of the original? Are any crucial points omitted? Has anything been added that was not in the original passage?

Example

Original:

> The arguments for greater scientific awareness and a more comfortable relationship with scientific reasoning are legion, and many have been flogged so often they're beginning to wheeze. A favorite thesis has it that people should know more about science because many of the vital issues of the day have a scientific component: think global warming, alternative energy, embryonic stem cell research, missile defense.... [while] others propose that a scientifically astute public would be relatively shielded against superstitious, wishful thinking, flimflammery, and fraud. They would realize that the premise behind astrology was ludicrous, and that the doctor or midwife or taxi driver who helped deliver you exerted a far greater pull on you at your moment of birth than did the sun, moon, or any of the planets. They would accept that the fortune in their cookie at the Chinese restaurant was written either by a computer or a new hire at the Wonton Food factory in Queens. They would calculate their odds of winning the lottery, see how ridiculously tiny they were, and decide to stop buying lottery tickets, at which point the education budgets of at least thirty of our fifty states would collapse.

Sarah's version:

Angier cites two common arguments for increased awareness and understanding of science among the general public. The first is that some important current issues, such as global warming and stem cell research, require scientific knowledge in order to be responsibly understood. The second is that a stronger scientific inclination would encourage rational thinking among citizens and prevent them from silly choices and foolish superstitions (7-8).

Madison's version:

Angier believes that citizens should have greater scientific awareness and a more comfortable relationship with scientific reasoning because many of the most important social and political issues include scientific ideas and research, including global warming, alternative energy, embryonic stem cell research, and missile defense. In addition, she argues that a scientifically-minded public would better resist superstitions, like astrology and Chinese fortune cookie messages, as well as wishful thinking, like the sort that encourages people to waste their money on lottery tickets (7-8).

Note the differences between Sarah's and Madison's summaries and decide which one is better and why.

Practice

Summarize the paragraph below. It is from page 35 of the same book. Here the author discusses some common misperceptions that people have of science.[11]

Original:

People have the mistaken impression that the great revolutions in the history of science overturned prevailing wisdom. In fact, most of the great ideas subsumed their predecessors, gulped them whole and got bigger in the act. Albert Einstein did not prove that Isaac Newton was wrong. Instead, he showed that Newton's theories of motion and gravity were incomplete, and that new equations were needed to explain the behavior of objects under extreme circumstances, such as when tiny particles travel at or near the speed of light. Einstein made the pi wide and lighter and more exotically scalloped in space and time. But for the workaday trajectories of Earth spinning around the sun, or a baseball barreling toward a bat, or a brand-new earring sliding down a drain, Newton's laws of motion still apply.

[11] The cited material is from:
Angier, Natalie. *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science. Boston:* Houghton, 2007. Print.
Mann, Charles C. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus.* New York: Vintage, 2006. Print.