

PARAPHRASING AND SUMMARIZING: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE INCOHERENT:

Students often confuse *summarizing* and *paraphrasing* literature. When a student summarizes a text, the student condenses many lines of material into a single sentence or so while keeping the content clear. A bad summary merely describes what the content is but leaves out context. I.e., often a bad summary is so short the original meaning gets lost. Here's an example using the first four lines of Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite," as it appears in Elizabeth Vandiver's translation:

ORIGINAL VANDIVER TRANSLATION:

Iridescent-throned Aphrodite, deathless
Child of Zeus, wile-weaver, I now implore you,
Don't--I beg you, Lady--with pains and torments
Crush down my spirit

GOOD SUMMARY:

In the opening lines, the speaker prays to Aphrodite, asking the goddess not to hurt her.

BAD SUMMARY:

This is a prayer to Aphrodite.

A poetic **paraphrase**, on the other hand, tries to restate every word or phrase in a new way. The goal in a paraphrase is to clarify the content by re-seeing and re-creating each word in every line. Thus, paraphrases may actually be longer than the original source (if that length makes the original easier to understand). Here are the main points to keep in mind:

- (1) A good paraphrase captures every single word in the original without leaving out any ideas, description, or phrasing.
- (2) A good paraphrase doesn't merely repeat parts of the original using the same words.
- (3) A good paraphrase might re-order the lines slightly to improve the ease of understanding.
- (4) A good paraphrase might be longer than the original passage.
- (5) A good paraphrase helps you understand a confusing passage.
- (6) A good paraphrase helps you see multiple possible meanings in a passage you thought you understood on the first reading.

GOOD PARAPHRASE:

Aphrodite sitting on the many-colored throne, immortal
Daughter of [the chief] god, creator of many tricks, now I ask a favor of you,
Please do not destroy my soul by flattening it with tortures and agonies
--I plead with you, noble female.

ANOTHER GOOD PARAPHRASE:

Goddess of love enthroned in light, never-dying
Offspring of the God-king, [lady who] weaves together clever plans, I beg you now,
Do not pulverize my soul--I ask you meekly, Mistress--with heartaches and suffering.

If it is necessary to add extra words for clarity, use brackets [like this] to show that you have added some words that weren't in the original. On the next page, I have included some paraphrases that I think are poor in quality for contrast, using the same passage as the source.

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Don't--I beg you, Lady--with pains and torments
Crush down my spirit

BAD PARAPHRASE #1 (too close to original):

Iridescent-throned Aphrodite, immortal
Child of Zeus, I now beg you, wile-weaver
Don't--I implore you, Lady--with torments and pains
Crush down my spirit.

BAD PARAPHRASE #2 (leaving out important ideas, words, or concepts)

Aphrodite sitting on the throne,
Divine girl, trickster, I ask you
Not to smash me with tortures and sorrow.

BAD PARAPHRASE #3 (changing from first to third person)

The speaker asks Aphrodite on the glowing throne, the un-killable
Daughter of Zeus, not to destroy her spirit with agony and sorrows.

BAD PARAPHRASE #4 (confusing Sappho with the poetic speaker)

The poet Sappho must have been having a bad romance, because she asks the love-
Goddess on the elaborate throne, the undying Daughter of the sky-God, not to squish
her soul with misery and pains.

Other Tips: (a) On a xerox copy, try underlining the subject of each clause once and underline each subject's verb(s) twice in the original passage. That will help you really see who's doing what in the original sentence if you don't understand it. (b) Look up words when you don't know the meaning of them. (c) When your paraphrase is done, go through your paraphrase and compare it to the original one word at time. Place a checkmark on each word in the original if you can find and circle the corresponding part in your paraphrase that captures that idea. If you can't find a matching section or word in your own paraphrase, you have a problem. (d) A thesaurus can be a big help if you need to think of another word for the original.

If you are reading a difficult passage, and you can't figure out what it means initially, try paraphrasing it. For a short work, try paraphrasing the entire poem.