



Thomas Larson

Paraphrase, or Writer with Child

1 / My partner and I have seen many therapists over the years of our longtime commitment. We know such tune-ups are critical for our relational health; she's a therapist herself, and I'm always willing. During sessions, we are reminded to practice what's called "looping"—listening to the other and then repeating what was said. "I hear her saying that she's sick to death of my grumpy moods in the morning and, what's more, she'd like to have one day a week where we get out of the 'damn house' and do something fun." Why do we do this exercise? Because each of us feels the other's concern is not *being heard*. (Which assumes that if heard, we are believed; and, if heard, it's possible to repair annoying, hurtful, and unconscious behaviors.) To repeat what the speaker said by the listener means the listener will "get it," that he is *more likely* to "get it" because he's the person who's not been "getting it." In psychotherapy, this simple act of paraphrasing favors the aggrieved one because her words have been ignored or disregarded.

By paraphrase, we attempt to say the "same thing" *in other words*. Helpful, you say, but also a bit indefinable. According to *The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language* edited by Tom McArthur (1996), under the entry for "paraphrase," its definitions are not simple. Each of the paradigmatic terms—explanation, clarification, translation—come pre-loaded. Like leading-role understudies, they may fit or stand-in for the character in a play, but the main actor's performance will, obviously, be superseded.

If the thing uttered or written in the first instance is unclear, a paraphrase may extend the muddled point and compound the unclarity, that is, put something too different in the original's place, a form of Chinese whispers. Still, it's a good-faith effort—to give the source another chance, words clarifying words. (With writing, as I'm doing now, I'm crafting the sentences inwardly and, on my typing fingertips, trying to say what I trust or hope the sentences want to say, a kind of paraphrase that assumes somewhere in my mind's recesses resides the more efficacious expression I truly desire, which can be, wholly or slightly, *better said*, clearer, perhaps less paraphrasable.) Language's commiseration over its own failings emphasizes an honest but fraught path—to avoid a wobbly or wild or an over-stipulative meaning. Which is why paraphrases can only be partially true.

2 / In the mid-seventeenth century, John Dryden, prefacing his translation of Ovid, wrote “paraphrase, or translation with latitude, [is] where the author is kept in view . . . but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense.” Yes, the *sense* of what is being written or said may, when included, help us understand a translatable source more than mere synonyms. An editor once told me it's OK for clarity's sake to use the same word again—especially to steer a reader through a difficult passage. Just don't overdo it. Likeminded words can spell trouble. Deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller says that the use of synonyms reveals the variability already embedded in our trying to be precise or worse, *certain* our words are declaring a truth. Observational statements often underscore the inaccuracy of what's comparable: *Your brother told me he could care less*, when, in fact, the brother said nothing, only pouted.

Moreover, hunting for synonyms (Susan Sontag's most used text was a thesaurus) channels our writing into the associative, which is not bad per se, but may divert us from the rigor of the original. I'm reminded that people communicate in different ways because of the audience, so to speak, with whom we speak—our mothers vs. our bowling league. In dialogue, you can always say: *Let me try that again*. (In politics, do-overs are increasingly not possible; typically, if you wildly misspeak, you're out on your tuchus.)

To get the sense across I try metaphor (shaving every morning is the bugle call of maleness) or shout out my Naval-officer father's command ("Let's go, now!") When the sense eludes us, we rise or stoop to paraphrase.

No, even if you want to, you can't just ascribe "a fine kettle of fish" the same duty as "a real mess." Why? For one, context. Who's speaking to whom? In a novel, a character who utters "that's a fine kettle of fish" expresses mild frustration, for example, with the furnace going out in the middle of a snowstorm, which is uttered by the narrator's mother-in-law who will not say what she really feels but trots out cliches, which, in turn, add a (desired) trait of indifference or self-delusion. What about the idiom, "in so many words"? Its meaning—precisely or literarily—is the reverse. While we use the word "no" or the light rage of "Are you kidding me?" to pushback against an unreasonable demand, we use "in so many words"—"I told him to leave, in so many words"—to euphemize "no" because that's our character: to virtue-signal a good intent, especially in families where we pad conversations with indirection and passive aggression, fearing directness will release the Cracken.

Taking apart idioms can go on like this forever, the phrase, "going on forever," another idiom that attract innumerable paraphrases.

A note about the unparaphrasable. Even though it's been written into at least one state's Supreme Court's opinion—that ex-President Trump "engaged in insurrection" on January 6, 2021—the Fourteenth Amendment, Section 3, does not specify (as it does for members of Congress and the military) that a President *per se* is ineligible to run for office after he's taken an oath to defend the Constitution *and* fomented a rebellion. Why they left that out, God only knows, to coin a phrase. Though it "sounds like" it should be against the law, its absent wording means the courts can neither cite it nor decode it. Which reminds us, such is how the Constitution works or was constructed (take your pick). A new ruling would mark a precedent, a dicey interpretation of the so-called sacred document. In such cases, the Supreme Court has ruled in the past that only Congress can make the

call with (another) impeachment or a new Constitutional amendment. However, the latter is not retroactive. Trump wins.

3 / Most know that in *Casablanca* Humphrey Bogart did *not* say, “Play it again, Sam.” Rather, the film’s famous quote is “Sam, Sam, play that song for me again,” *that* song, “As Time Goes By.” But in film folklore, the paraphrase has taken over the actual, I suspect, because it’s shorter, pithier, fits on a poster, and became the title of another adorably neurotic Woody Allen movie. (Allen quotes the original movie with clips and reenacts or paraphrases lines and scenes as well.) Note that the meaning of the two spoken phrases is similar but changed enough to shift Bogart’s character, Rick. Had Rick said, “Play it again, Sam,” he would have been more direct or matter-of-fact than his actual line, “Sam, Sam,” the words of a needy romantic. In this sense, the paraphrase keeps Bogie’s tough-guy persona alive even though the terse new line is fiction.

Nonfictionists use paraphrase and summary, which emphasizes concision, because authors include what others write or say (quotation), what they want to translate or say again that others have written or said (paraphrase), and what *Webster’s New Dictionary of Synonyms* notes is key to the paraphrastic: “to present the meaning rather than the phrasing of a passage or work.” “To present the meaning” of anything (the Book of Job, Morrison’s *Beloved*) allows for a retelling, which is interpretive, and, thus, reliably ends up worse.

Literary journalists (I add in essayists and memoirists who are not so self-absorbed that no one else can get a word in) employ paraphrase for two reasons: 1) reporters are conduits who quote a lot because (I apologize) the story is about what others are saying and what others are saying about what their subjects are saying, and 2) those whose words journalists may quote are, more often than not, *hardly worth quoting*. As a journalist, of the hundreds of people I’ve spoken with, it’s very rare to get a valuable succinct flair-filled quotation. This is a fact of how “real people” express themselves

—heartfelt but seldom memorably. It’s also a fact that the role of authors is to write their own words and resist, in part, letting sources do the “writing” for them.

Except in that rare instance when I interviewed fathers whose kids had died, and I heard lines I had to quote—the unparaphrasable. A man, Ralph, whose daughter had been killed in a car wreck, went to see Dr. Ken Druck whose daughter had died similarly and who counseled men “in a club no one wanted to join.” Ralph wanted Druck to confirm his pain. “Don’t lie to me,” Ralph said. “Tell me the truth. I’m fucked, aren’t I?” “You’re fucked,” Druck replied. Ralph pointed a finger at me and said, “That was the best God-damn thing he could have told me.”

Joan Didion’s matchless essay, “The White Album” (1979), renders the chaos during the late 1960s/early 1970s around the Manson murders in Los Angeles in a nonlinear style, dramatizing the era’s instability and its cognitive effect on her sanity. It’s a lesson in how frightening life is when the larger “story,” particularly for a journalist, seldom coheres, is disorienting, and feels impenetrable. In the penultimate section, Didion writes that she believed her “basic affective controls were no longer intact.” A psychiatric report described her having “experienced an attack of vertigo, nausea, and a feeling that she was going to pass out.” She endured a “battery” of “tests and consultations.” One was with a neurologist who said the “disorder” was “in my central nervous system.” Working with his diagnosis, she lists what damage might have happened and still might happen going forward: Lots of blown circuits. “The startling fact was this: my body was offering a precise physiological equivalent to what had been going on in my mind. ‘Lead a simple life,’ the neurologist advised. ‘Not that it makes any difference we know about.’ In other words, it was another story without a narrative.”

4 / A marvelous instance of creative paraphrasing comes in the first of three essays that comprise Daniel Mendelsohn’s 2020 *Three Rings: A Tale of Exile, Narrative, and Fate*. The author, a scholar of Greek and

Roman literature, lays out the narrative plan used in *The Odyssey*, known as the “ring narrative.” A ring is a technique that begins in “a formulaic line or stock scene,” “meander[s] away into a digression,” and may take widely different routes before coming back to where it began. The “digression” is like a spiral that travels out and returns, by a modified path, to its origin, the stock scene or opening formulaic, which Mendelsohn adopts as the structure of the book he’s writing.

The memoir’s first section begins with the formulaic, which I label 1, followed by a digression and a return to the repeated-but-slightly-altered formulaic, labeled 2 and 3. You can hear 2 and 3 *paraphrasing* 1, which, unsurprisingly, recalls Odysseus’s trip home after ten years wandering: 1) “A stranger arrives in an unknown city after a long voyage. He has been separated from his family for some time; somewhere there is a wife, perhaps a child. The journey has been a troubled one, and the stranger is tired.” 2) “A stranger arrives in an unknown city after a long voyage. He is middle-aged and has been separated from his family; somewhere there is a wife, somewhere a child. The journey has been winding and the stranger is tired.” 3) “A man has arrived in an unknown city after a long voyage. He is tired, middle-aged; wracked with anxieties about the wife and child from whom he has been separated.”

Each paraphrase rephrases the original somewhat, adds a telling detail or two, and, in its repetition, emphasizes what, in the broader story, is progressively more important. Physical tiredness, for one; for another, psychological despair. The narrator is realizing that instead of the vacuous “troubled journey” he felt first, he was, instead, “wracked with anxieties,” because of family separation. This renaming is mirrored in Mendelsohn’s writerly meander; he’s realizing that for the past 20 years his anxiety has grown because he’s been writing about relatives his extended family lost in the Holocaust, his father and his father’s death, and the enigmas of *The Odyssey*.

The ring progression works like so: first state one thing, move away from it and, as you move, move back and forth in time and theme, then go back to the first thing and relaunch the narrative again, using paraphrase to repurpose the tale. I wonder whether this snake eating its tail (an ouroboros) isn’t yet

another “way of the essay”—to begin, to wander, to go far enough and freely enough so that when you do return, you will be changed, having trusted yourself to wander away.

5 / Finally, to paraphrase is to define something for an oppositional or exclusionary reason, that which something is *not*: from *The Concise Oxford Companion*, “the compound *teapot* can be paraphrased or explained by the phrase *a pot for tea* but not by *a pot of tea*.” It’s a form of naming the thing’s function, not its being. I’m reminded that the prepositions “for” and “of,” spatial or temporal pivots in language, are quite different. Pots on stoves can be “of” any number of liquids, but a teapot is used to steep tea in, that is, *for* tea. A teapot is not a pot of coffee; that’s a coffeepot. Furthermore, we don’t think of a teapot as a plant pot or a chamber pot. (Only poetically is there a pot of chamber or a pot for chamber, which sounds meaningless.)

Let language evolve its limbs and lattices, and we produce not a “pot for plants,” but a flowerpot, a vase, or a planter. Dictionaries define a word by its usage over time, noting its employment history in varying contexts with speakers and authors from different regions and classes, in literature, in dialects, in rare and in everyday use. Naming something as close to its function as possible allows for a greater precision in language than half-right, comparative assignments.

In writing, paraphrasing what I’m trying to convey relies on the translation from a phrase, a clause, or a sentence, created for its sound and sense, refocused or maybe wholly altered once it’s milled or sieved by “in other words”—a search for the clearer or more subtle statement or image over the vague or obvious statement or image that came first to mind. (All those *or*’s—intentionally crafted—denote the paraphrase’s utility.)

Paraphrase may get me closer to hearing what it is I’m trying to say or write, tuning into the lexical frequency of my “inward ear.” The good news is, I usually get close after several rewordings because

writing allows me to be intimate with language, to be charmed, to feel I'm the intended mate of the phrases and sentences that desire me as their bearer, a kind of writer with child.