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# HOW TO WRITE A PARAGRAPH



*The Art of  
Substantive  
Writing*

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How to say something worth saying about something worth saying something about

## Introduction

Most people realize that learning to write is “among the most important skills a student can learn.” But far fewer realize that writing is also the key to the acquisition of content itself: “the mechanism through which students learn to connect the dots in their knowledge.” Far too few realize that for students to learn, “they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else.” In other words, “if students are to learn, they must write.” All these points are emphasized in a report recently issued by the *National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges* (*New York Times*, 4/25/03), which goes on to say that writing is “woefully ignored in most American schools today.” Moreover, according to the same *New York Times* article, “a 2002 study of California college students found that most freshmen could not analyze arguments, synthesize information, or write papers that were reasonably free of language errors.”

At present students are poor writers, not because they are incapable of learning to write well, but because they have never been taught the foundations of substantive writing. They lack intellectual discipline as well as strategies for improving their writing. This is true on the one hand because teachers often lack a clear theory of the relationship between writing and learning and, on the other, are concerned with the time involved in grading written work.

If we understand the most basic concepts in critical thinking, we can provide the grounds for a solution to both problems:

- (1) a theory that links substantive writing and thinking with the acquisition of knowledge, and
- (2) awareness of how to design writing assignments that do not require one-on-one instructor-student feedback.

This guide links with and reinforces other key guides, particularly *How to Read a Paragraph* and *How to Think Analytically* (see inside back cover). All three guides provide techniques that enhance student learning and foster the ability to communicate clearly and logically what one is learning.

The development of writing abilities, as well as all other intellectual abilities, occurs only through sound theory and routine practice. When students understand the relationship between learning and writing, and are engaged in routine writing practice using the tools of critical thinking, they are able to learn content at deeper and deeper levels, and gradually improve their ability to communicate important ideas.

## The Theory

### The Premise of This Guide

Writing is essential to learning. One cannot be educated and yet unable to communicate one's ideas in written form. But, learning to write can occur only through a process of cultivation requiring intellectual discipline. As with any set of complex skills, there are fundamentals of writing that must be internalized and then applied using one's thinking. This guide focuses on the most important of those fundamentals.

### Writing for a Purpose

Skilled writers do not write blindly, but purposely. They have an agenda, goal, or objective. Their purpose, together with the nature of what they are writing (and their situation), determines how they write. They write in different ways in different situations for different purposes. There is also a nearly universal purpose for writing, and that is to *say something worth saying about something worth saying something about*.

In general, then, when we write, we translate inner meanings into public words. We put our ideas and experiences into written form. Accurately translating intended meanings into written words is an analytic, evaluative, and creative set of acts. Unfortunately, few people are skilled in this work of translation. Few are able to select and combine words that, so combined, convey an intended meaning to an audience of readers.

Of course, if we are writing for pure pleasure and personal amusement, it may not matter if others do not understand what we write. We may simply enjoy the act of writing itself. This is fine as long as we know that our writing is meant only for us.

Among the various purposes for writing are the following:

- for sheer pleasure
- to express a simple idea
- to convey specific technical information
- to convince the reader to accept an important position or argument
- to challenge the reader to consider a new worldview
- to express what we are learning (or have learned) in a subject

People write in pursuit of many specific and varied agendas. Consider how the purposes would vary for the following writers:

- a media advisor writing political campaign literature
- a newspaper editor deciding how to edit a story to maintain reader interest
- a media consultant writing copy for an advertisement
- a chemist writing a laboratory report
- a novelist writing a novel
- a poet writing a poem

- a student writing a research report

Clearly, one's purpose in writing influences the writing skills one needs and uses. Nevertheless, there are some fundamental writing skills we all need if we are to develop the art of saying something worth saying about something worth saying something about. We call this substantive writing. And learning the art of substantive writing has many important implications for our development as thinkers. For example, it is important in learning how to learn. And, it is important in coming to understand ourselves. It can enable us to gain self-insight, as well as insight into the many dimensions of our lives.

## **Substantive Writing**

To learn how to write something worth reading, we must keep two questions in mind: "Do I have a subject or idea worth writing about?" and "Do I have something of significance to say about it?"

Having recognized possible variations in purpose, we also should recognize that there are core writing tools and skills for writing about anything substantive, for targeting ideas of depth and significance. These tools and skills are the focus of this guide.

## **The Problem of Impressionistic Writing**

The impressionistic mind follows associations, wandering from paragraph to paragraph, drawing no clear distinctions within its thinking and its writing from moment to moment. Being fragmented, it fragments what it writes. Being uncritical, it assumes its own point of view to be insightful and justified, and therefore not in need of justification in comparison to competing points of view. Being self-deceived, it fails to see itself as undisciplined. Being rigid, it does not learn from what it reads, writes, or experiences.

Whatever knowledge the impressionistic mind absorbs is uncritically intermixed with prejudices, biases, myths, and stereotypes. It lacks insight into the importance of understanding how minds create meaning and how reflective minds monitor and evaluate as they write. To discipline our writing, we must go beyond impressionistic thinking.

## **Writing Reflectively**

Unlike the impressionistic mind, the reflective mind seeks meaning, monitors what it writes, draws a clear distinction between its thinking and the thinking of its audience. The reflective mind, being purposeful, adjusts writing to specific goals. Being integrated, it interrelates ideas it is writing with ideas it already commands. Being critical, it assesses what it writes for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness. Being open to new ways of thinking, it values new ideas and learns from what it writes.

The reflective mind improves its thinking by thinking (reflectively) about it. Likewise, it improves its writing by thinking (reflectively) about writing. It moves back

and forth between writing and thinking about how it is writing. It moves forward a bit, and then loops back upon itself to check on its own operations. It checks its tracks. It makes good its ground. It rises above itself and exercises oversight. This applies to the reflective mind while writing — or reading or listening or making decisions.

The foundation for this ability is knowledge of how the mind functions when writing well. For example, if I know (or discover) that what I am writing is difficult for others to understand, I intentionally explain each key sentence more thoroughly and give more examples and illustrations. I look at what I am writing from the readers' point of view.

The reflective mind creates an inner dialogue with itself, assessing what it is writing while it is writing:

- Have I stated my main point clearly?
- Have I explained my main point adequately?
- Have I given my readers examples from my own experience that connect important ideas to their experience?
- Have I included metaphors or analogies that illustrate for the reader what I am saying?

If I realize that my potential readers are likely to be unsympathetic to my viewpoint, I try to help them connect primary beliefs they already hold to primary beliefs in my viewpoint. I try to put myself into their circumstances with their beliefs and outlook. I show them that I understand their perspective.

## **Writing as Exercise for the Mind**

You have a mind. But do you know how to develop it? Are you aware of your basic prejudices and preconceptions? Are you aware of the extent to which your thinking mirrors the thinking of those around you? Are you aware of the extent to which your thinking has been influenced by the thinking of the culture in which you have been raised and conditioned?

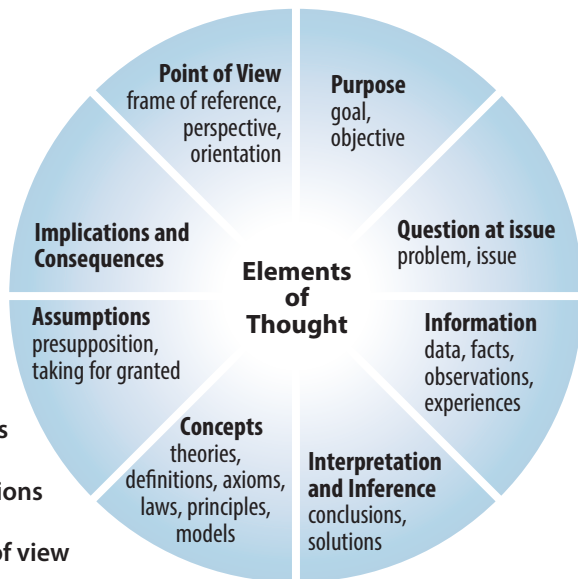
In writing about the ideas of others, you can learn to enter the minds of others and appreciate new points of view. In coming to terms with the mind of another, you can come to discover your own mind, both its strengths and its weaknesses. To write the thoughts your mind thinks, you must learn how to do second-order thinking — that is, how to think about your thinking while you are thinking from outside your thinking. But how do you get outside your thinking?

To do this, you first must understand that there are eight basic structures to all thinking. Whenever we think, we think for a purpose within a point of view based on assumptions leading to implications and consequences. We use concepts, ideas, and theories to interpret data, facts, and experiences in order to answer questions, solve problems, and resolve issues.

When we take command of these eight basic elements of reasoning, we gain powerful intellectual tools that enable us to think at a higher level. We understand that whenever anyone reasons about anything whatsoever, these parts are inherent in their thinking. Thus, when you write, you inevitably write for a purpose, make inferences, and think within a point of view. At the same time, your readers have a point of view of their own. They have their purposes, their questions, their assumptions, and their beliefs. The better you are at understanding the perspectives of your readers, the better you can understand how to explain your reasoning to them. The better you understand someone else's system of thoughts, the better you can understand your own.

### Thinking then:

- has purposes
- raises questions
- uses information
- utilizes concepts
- makes inferences
- makes assumptions
- generates implications
- embodies a point of view



When you can move back and forth effectively between what you are writing and what you want your writing to accomplish, you bring what you are thinking to bear upon what you are writing, and you bring what you are writing to bear upon what you are thinking. You change your writing when you recognize through your thinking that improvement is needed — and how it is needed.

### How to Write a Sentence

Within a piece of written work, every sentence should stand in a clear relationship to other sentences. Each sentence, and indeed every word of every sentence, should support the purpose of the written piece.

An important part of writing with discipline is connecting sentences to the broader context within which they are located, seeing how they fit within the whole. For every sentence you write, then, you can ask:

- How does this sentence connect with the other sentences in the paragraph?
- How does this sentence relate to the organizing idea of this text as a whole?

## **Writing to Learn**

Everything we write is a potential learning experience. Writing is a systematic process for learning essential meanings. When we write to become good writers, we teach ourselves as we explain things to others. In fact, teaching through writing is one of the most powerful strategies for learning. When we take core ideas, ideas of substance, and work them into our minds by developing them on paper, they become ideas we can use productively in our lives.

At the same time, to learn well, one must write well. One learns to write well not by writing many things badly, but a few things well. The few things we should write well are substantive pieces, paragraphs and papers containing important ideas, elaborations that ground our thinking in powerful ideas. It is quite possible to educate oneself entirely through writing, if one has the intellectual skills to work through important texts, enter conflicting viewpoints, internalize important ideas learned, and apply those ideas to one's life. Alternatively, one cannot be an educated person without consistently learning through writing. Why? Because education is a lifelong process that at best begins in school. Without continually integrating new ideas into the ones already established in our thinking, our ideas become stagnant and rigid.

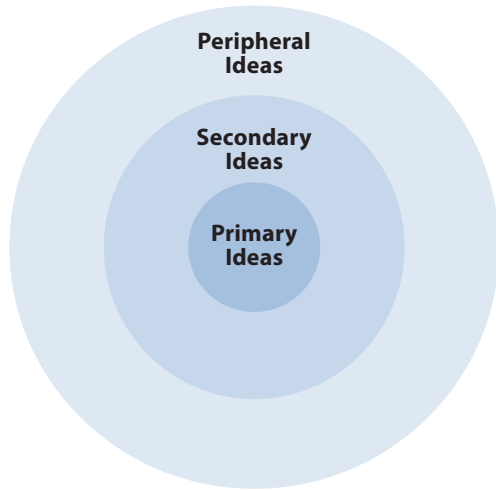
## **Substantive Writing in Content Areas**

To gain knowledge, we must construct it in our minds. Writing what we are trying to internalize helps us achieve that purpose. When we are able to make connections in writing, we begin to take ownership of these connections. To do this, we must learn how to identify core ideas in the books we read, and then explain those ideas in writing, along with the role they play within the subjects we are studying.

All knowledge exists in systems of meanings, with interrelated primary, secondary, and peripheral ideas. Imagine a series of circles beginning with a small core circle of primary ideas, surrounded by concentric circles of secondary ideas, moving to an outer circle of peripheral ideas. The primary ideas, at the core, explain the secondary and peripheral ideas. Whenever we read to acquire knowledge, we must write to take ownership, first, of the primary ideas, for they are key to understanding all the other ideas. Furthermore, just as we must write to gain an initial understanding of the primary ideas, we must also write to begin to think within the system as a whole and to make interconnections between ideas. The sooner we begin to think, and therefore write, within a system, the sooner the system becomes meaningful to us.

Thus, when we take command of a core of historical ideas, we begin to think and write historically. When we take command of a core of scientific ideas, we begin to think and write scientifically. Core or primary ideas are the key to every system of knowledge. They are the key to learning any subject. They are the key to retaining what we learn and applying it to life's problems. Without writing about these ideas, they never fully take root in our minds. But by seeking out these ideas and digesting them, we multiply the important subjects we can write about, as well as the multiple important things we can say about them.

**Essential Idea:**  
**Writing about primary  
 and secondary ideas  
 in a discipline is a  
 key to understanding  
 the discipline.**



## Relating Core Ideas to Other Core Ideas

We should use writing to relate core ideas we learn within one discipline or domain to core ideas in other systems of knowledge, for knowledge exists not only in a system but also in relation to all other systems of knowledge.

Mastering any set of foundational ideas makes it easier to learn other foundational ideas. Learning to think within one system of knowledge helps us learn within other systems. Writing is crucial to that process.

For example, if in studying botany we learn that all plants have cells, we should connect this idea to the fact that all animals have cells (which we learned in studying biology). We then can begin to consider the similarities and differences between the types of animal and plant cells while recognizing a foundational concept that applies to both botany and biology. Or consider the relation between psychology and sociology. Psychology focuses on individual behavior while sociology focuses on group behavior. But people's individual psychology influences how they relate to group norms, and social groups shape how individuals deal with their perceived life problems and opportunities. By putting core ideas within these two disciplines into words, we better understand



both fields and therefore can more effectively apply our knowledge to the real world (wherein the psychological and sociological are deeply intertwined).

## **Writing Within Disciplines**

As we have said, to write within subject disciplines, you must recognize that all disciplines are, in fact, systems of thought. Indeed, often they are systems of systems. Thus, scientific thinking forms a large-scale system of thought (which contrasts with other systems, such as ethical thinking). Science as a large-scale system also contains sub-systems (physics, chemistry, biology, physiology, and so forth). Science, therefore, is a system of systems.

But, unlike science, in which there is agreement on the most basic principles guiding scientific thinking, some systems of systems lack agreement even on their most basic assumptions. For example, the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and economics are systems of conflicting systems. In contrast to science (wherein all systems work together), philosophical, psychological, and economic systems vie with one another for dominance. Each of these disciplines contains competing schools of thought that contradict each other in important ways.

To be an effective writer within disciplines, you must learn to identify (for any given subject) whether it is best understood as a system of supporting systems (such as math and science) or a system of conflicting systems (such as philosophy, psychology, and economics). If you are thinking within a system-harmonious discipline, your task is to master how the systems within it support one another. If you are thinking within a system-conflicting field, your task is to master how and why the systems within it conflict. Of course, in seeing how conflicting systems diverge, you also discover how they overlap. Conflict between systems of thought is rarely, if ever, total and absolute.

To test your knowledge of any given system of thought, you should be able to state, elaborate, exemplify, and illustrate the most fundamental concept within that system. For example, if you are studying science, you should be able to, at minimum, write your understanding of what science is in a way that would satisfy scientists. If you are studying history, or indeed any other field of study, you should be able to do the same. You should be able, as well, to explain in writing how fundamental concepts between disciplines overlap or conflict.

## **The Work of Writing**

Writing, then, is a form of intellectual work. And intellectual work requires a willingness to persevere through difficulties. But perhaps even more important, good writing requires understanding what intellectual work is and how it relates to writing. This is where most students fall short. Here is an illustration: Creating a paragraph well is like building a house. You need a foundation, and everything else must be built upon that foundation. The house must have at least one entrance, and it must be apparent to people where that entrance is. The first floor must fit the foundation, and the second

floor must match up with the first, with some stairway that enables us to get from the first floor to the second.

Building a house involves the work of both design and construction. Each is essential. No one would expect students to automatically know how to design and construct houses. But sometimes we approach writing as if knowledge of how to design and write a paragraph or a paper were apparent to all students.

### Questioning as We Write

Skilled writers approach writing as an active dialogue involving questioning. They question as they write. They question to understand. They question to evaluate what they are writing. They question to bring important ideas into their thinking. Here are some of the questions good writers ask while writing:

- Why am I writing this? What is my purpose? What do I want the reader to come away with?
- Is there some part of what I have written that I don't really understand? Perhaps I am repeating what I have heard people say without ever having thought through what exactly it means.
- If something I have written is vague, how can I make it clearer or more precise?
- Do I understand the meaning of the key words I have used, or do I need to look them up in the dictionary?
- Am I using any words in special or unusual ways? Have I explained special meanings to the reader?
- Am I sure that what I have said is accurate? Do I need to qualify anything?
- Am I clear about my main point and why I think it is important?
- Do I know what question my paragraph answers?
- Do I need to spend more time investigating my topic or issue? Do I need more information?

If a person tries to write without understanding what writing involves, the writing will likely be poor. For example, many students see writing as a fundamentally passive activity. Their theory of writing seems to be something like this: "You write whatever comes to your mind, sentence by sentence, until you have written the assigned length."

By contrast, the work of substantive writing is the work of first choosing (constructing) a subject worth writing about and then thinking through (constructing) something worth saying about that subject. It is a highly selective activity. Five intellectual acts required for developing substance in your writing are:

- Choose a subject or idea of importance.
- Decide on something important to say about it.

- Explain or elaborate your basic meaning.
- Construct examples that will help readers connect what you are saying to events and experiences in their lives.
- Construct one or more analogies and/or metaphors that will help readers connect what you are writing about with something similar in their lives.

## **Non-Substantive Writing**

It is possible to learn to write with an emphasis on style, variety of sentence structure, and rhetorical principles without learning to write in a substantive manner. Rhetorically powerful writing may be, and in our culture often is, intellectually bankrupt. Many intellectually impoverished thinkers write well in the purely rhetorical sense.

Propaganda, for one, is often expressed in a rhetorically effective way. Political speeches empty of significant content are often rhetorically well-designed. Sophistry and self-delusion often thrive in rhetorically proficient prose.

A *New York Times* special supplement on education (Aug. 4, 2002) included a description of a new section in the SAT focused on a “20-minute writing exercise.” The prompt those taking the test were asked to write on was as follows: “There is always a however.” One might as justifiably ask a person to write on the theme, “There is always an always!” Or “There is never a never!” Such writing prompts are the equivalent of an intellectual Rorschach inkblot. They do not define a clear intellectual task. There is no issue to be reasoned through. Thus, the writer is encouraged to pontificate using rhetorical and stylistic devices rather than reason using intellectual good sense, to talk about nothing as if it is something.

Substantive writing requires that the writer begin with a significant, intellectually well-defined task. This writing can be assessed for clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness (rather than rhetorical style and flourish). Substantive writing enables the author to take ownership of ideas worth understanding. There are numerous possibilities for designing such a writing task. We shall exemplify some basic options next.

## The Practice

### Exercises in Substantive Writing

You now know something about the theory of substantive writing. In the discussion that follows, you will be given strategies for practicing substantive writing. Each form of practice will help you write more substantively: to identify subjects worth talking about, to say something worth saying about them, and to say what you have to say clearly and precisely. Substantive writing requires that the writer know where she is beginning, where she is going, and how she is getting there.

The foundations of substantive writing are based on foundational critical thinking principles and concepts — for example, on the elements and standards of thought. The elements of thought enable us to break down thought into its constituent parts (purpose, question, information, inference, concept, assumption, implication, point of view). Standards of thought enable us to evaluate thought (for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, fairness). Knowing how to analyze and evaluate thinking is essential to substantive writing. These critical thinking processes are utilized in the final two sets of exercises in this section.

To introduce examples of substantive thought, we have identified and include in this section some classic texts and quotations. We use them as a springboard to substantive writing. If one can take a substantive text and capture its essential meaning in writing (using one's own words and thoughts), one has begun the process of writing substantively.

Most of the exercises in this section require the use of the most prominent critical thinking strategy for clarification — to state, elaborate, exemplify, and illustrate a thought. The essential first steps in learning to write substantively are (1) to find a subject worth writing about, (2) to discover something significant to say about it, and (3) to express oneself clearly and precisely. To think well, we must at least think clearly. Confused and muddled thinking are never the basis for either knowledge or understanding.

Paraphrasing — putting into your own words — what a sentence or text is saying is at the heart of what we are advocating. When one can say what great minds have thought, one can think what great minds have said. Analysis and evaluation are a logical follow-up to paraphrasing.

We provide a variety of templates for practice. Some of these exercises are easier than others. If you decide that any given exercise is too challenging, pass it by and work on others, then come back to the difficult ones later. Our goal is to help you proceed from the simple to the complex, but what is simple for one person is sometimes complex to another.

Finally, we do not have the space to exemplify all possible patterns of substantive writing. But the patterns we do provide are basic and, when routinely practiced, lead to a progressively deeper understanding of substantive thinking, learning, and writing.

## Paraphrasing

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to “paraphrase” is to *express the meaning of a word, phrase, passage, or work in other words, usually with the object of fuller and clearer exposition*. To the extent that we cannot state in our own words the meaning of a word, sentence, or passage, we lack an understanding of that word, sentence, or passage. We bring ideas into our thinking by “thinking them into our thinking.” One of the best ways to do this is to practice paraphrasing — writing in our own words our understanding of an idea, sentence, or passage.

This is easier said than done. To paraphrase a substantive sentence or passage effectively, the writer must come to think, and appreciate, the substantive thought behind the sentence or passage. Without this appreciation, without deeply understanding the thought expressed in the original, one cannot render that thought adequately in different words.

The human mind can understand a *deep* thought at varying levels of depth. Many will say, for example, that they understand the thought, “A little learning is a dangerous thing,” when subsequent discussion proves that they do not appreciate it — for example, when they fail to see how it applies to their life. The fact is that few have had practice in paraphrasing substantive sentences and passages. Few have thought about the significance of the art of paraphrasing. Few understand its essential connection to substantive learning.

To appreciate fine painting or music or novels or poems or any other domain of intellectual creativity, we must experience them in multiple forms. An insightful paraphrase of an important text provides an initial sense of one way to think the thought in that text, for a paraphrase re-creates an original thought in new words. To select the words that do the job, one must struggle with the thought and with possible words as candidates to express it.

To re-phrase a powerful thought adequately, it is usually necessary to express it in a more extended form. That is why paraphrasing a thought is sometimes called *unpacking* it. The original is compact. The paraphrase takes it apart and lays out the elements — and therefore expresses it in *more*, rather than *fewer*, words.

There is, it should be clear, no exact form of paraphrase. Most substantial thoughts can be captured by a variety of formulations — each giving us a different angle of vision. Practice in paraphrasing is, therefore, practice in taking ownership of thinking that stretches the mind, thinking that brings us to deeper and deeper levels of understanding. In a world of glorified superficiality, disciplined practice in paraphrasing significant thought is rare.

Now consider the four questions that can be used to assess writing for clarity:

1. Could you state your basic point in one simple sentence?
2. Could you elaborate your basic point more fully (in other words)?
3. Could you give me an example of your point from your experience?

#### 4. Could you give me an analogy or metaphor to help me see what you mean?

Each of these clarification strategies requires a substantive writing skill. You will be developing these abilities and others in the writing exercises in this section.

### Clarification Strategies

- **The ability to state a thesis clearly in a sentence.** If we cannot accurately state our key idea in a sentence using our own words, we don't really know what we want to say.
- **The ability to explain a thesis sentence in greater detail.** If we cannot elaborate our key idea, then we have not yet connected its meaning to other concepts that we understand.
- **The ability to give examples of what we are saying.** If we cannot connect what we have elaborated with concrete situations in the real world, our knowledge of the meanings is still abstract, and, to some extent, vague.
- **The ability to illustrate what we are saying with a metaphor, analogy, picture, diagram, or drawing.** If we cannot generate metaphors, analogies, pictures, or diagrams of the meanings we are constructing, we have not yet connected what we understand with other domains of knowledge and experience.

### Sample Paraphrases

Consider the following sample paraphrases before we move on to more detailed paraphrasing:

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetuate it. — *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

→ People who see unethical things being done to others but who fail to intervene (when they are able to intervene) are as unethical as those who are causing harm in the first place.

Every effort to confine Americanism to a single pattern, to constrain it to a single formula, is disloyalty to everything that is valid in Americanism. — *Henry Steele Commager*

→ There is no one "right way" to be an American. When everyone in America is expected to think within one belief system, when people are ostracized or persecuted for thinking autonomously, when people are labeled "UnAmerican" for independent thinking, the only legitimate definition of "true American" is annulled.

- In a free society, standards of public morality can be measured only by whether physical coercion — violence against persons or property — occurs. There is no right to be offended by words, actions, or symbols. — *Richard E. Sincere, Jr.*
- Ethics in a free society is determined by whether violence has occurred against a person or one's property. People do not have the right to be protected against being shocked by the life-styles of others.
- Liberty is the only thing you cannot have unless you are willing to give it to others. — *William Allen White*
- If you want to be free, you have to allow others their freedom.
- I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones. — *John Cage*
- Many of the ideas that have permeated human thinking throughout the years are harmful or dangerous. An old idea is not necessarily a good idea, nor is a new idea necessarily a bad one.
- The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts as are only injurious to others. — *Thomas Jefferson*
- The only authority government should have is to stop people from harming one another.
- The propagandist's purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human. — *Aldous Huxley*
- The goal of propaganda is to convince people that other groups of people are inhuman, and therefore not worthy of respect and just treatment.
- The shepherd always tries to persuade the sheep that their interests and his own are the same. — *Stendhal*
- People in control always try to manipulate people into believing that what is good for those in control is good for the people as well.

## Paraphrasing Short Quotes

One way to paraphrase quotes is to begin by writing out your initial thoughts. Then paraphrase the quote in the light of your commentary. In your commentary, explain the significance of what is being talked about and what is being said. If there is an important concept at the heart of the quote — a concept such as democracy or power as in the two example quotes below — think through that concept before you paraphrase.

### First Exercise

In this section we present you with short quotes based on significant insights. We want you to paraphrase each one. But first write out your initial thoughts. When paraphrasing try to use more, rather than less elaboration to unpack the ideas in the quote. We provide two examples, but without initial thoughts.

### Example One

Quote: *“Democracy is rule by the people.”*

**Possible Paraphrase:** Democracy exists only to the extent that there is a broad basis of equality of political power among the people at large. This means that all people within the state should have relatively equal power and equal input in determining what the laws will be. By implication, a state fails to be democratic to the extent that a few people — whether they be wealthy or otherwise influential — have more power than others.

### Example Two

Quote: *“Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*

**Possible Paraphrase:** The more control people gain over the lives of others, the greater is their propensity to exploit those people, and their consequent loss of personal integrity and honesty.

Now it is your turn to practice, using the quotes that follow:

Quote: *“If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.”* — **Benjamin Franklin**

**Possible Paraphrase:**

Quote: *“Universal suffrage, without universal education, would be a curse.”*  
— **H. L. Wayland**

**Possible Paraphrase:**



Quote: “The school should always have as its aim that the young leave it as a harmonious personality, not as a specialist... The development of general ability for independent thinking and judgment should always be placed foremost, not the acquisition of special knowledge.” — **Albert Einstein**

**Possible Paraphrase:**

Quote: “Do not ask if a man has been through college; ask if a college has been through him — if he is a walking university.” — **E. H. Chapin**

**Possible Paraphrase:**

In this activity, you have interpreted important quotes by paraphrasing them. In the next activity you will practice another way of approaching deep understanding of important texts.

### Second Exercise

Use the following template to guide you in explicating the following quotes:

1. The essence of this quote is...
2. In other words...
3. For example...
4. To give you a metaphor (or analogy) so you can better understand what I am saying...

### Example

“All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, till they take root in our personal experience.” — **Goethe**

1. The essence of this quote is that the most important ideas are not new, but what is new is using them in our thinking. We have to think them through for ourselves, again and again, until we can use them in our lives.
2. In other words, we don't have to be brilliant to use significant ideas in our life. All of the most important ideas have already been figured out and thought through numerous times throughout history. But if we want to take possession of these ideas, we have to be committed to working them into our thinking, connecting them to personal experience, and then using them to guide our behavior. If we want to live better lives, we don't have to come up with novel or original ideas. Rather, we need to learn how to live the ones already available to us.
3. For example: consider what Socrates proposed (around 600 B.C.): The unexamined life is not worth living. Throughout history, many people have said that if you want to improve your life, you have to look at the way you live; you have to think about your behavior and what causes you to behave irrationally. Yet, few people take this

idea seriously. Few have thought about what it would mean to examine their life. Few have any tools for doing this. Few have related this idea to their personal experience. Few have really faced themselves straight on.

4. To give you a metaphor (or analogy) so you can better understand what I am saying, consider this: Every city has libraries containing thousands of books that express important ideas and experiences. Yet, most of these books are ignored, not read. Few think of the library as a place to gain ideas that can change their lives for the better. Few realize that rather than to seek out a flashy (and probably superficial) new idea from the mass media, they should master some of the many old, time-tested, deep, and important ideas (from a library or good bookstore).

### **Now it's your turn.**

Use the structure outlined on page 16 to write substantively about the following quotes:

*"No man is free who is not master of himself."* — **Epictetus**

*"All our freedoms are a single bundle; all must be secure if any is to be preserved."* — **Dwight D. Eisenhower**

*"None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free."* — **Goethe**

*"Security is never an absolute... The government of a free people must take certain chances for the sake of maintaining freedom which the government of a police state avoids."* — **Bartholini**

*"The first step to knowledge is to know that we are ignorant."* — **Cecil**

*"The more you practice what you know, the more shall you know what to practice."* — **W. Jenkin**

*"What is not fully understood is not possessed."* — **Goethe**

*"If you would thoroughly know anything, teach it to others."* — **Tyron Edwards**

*"The mind is but a barren soil... unless it be continually fertilized and enriched with foreign matter."* — **Sir J. Reynolds**

*"What stubbing, plowing, digging, and harrowing is to land, that thinking, reflecting, examining is to the mind."* — **Berkeley**

*"Don't despair of a student if he has one clear idea."* — **Nathaniel Emmons**

*"Narrow minds think nothing right that is beyond their own capacity."* — **Rochefoucauld**

*"There is no more independence in politics than there is in jail."* — **Will Rogers**

*"If you wish the sympathy of broad masses then you must tell them the crudest and most stupid things."* — **Adolf Hitler**

*“Two kinds of men generally best succeed in political life: men of no principle, but of great talent; and men of no talent; but of one principle — that of obedience to their superiors.”* — **Wendell Phillips**

*“Justice without power is inefficient; power without justice is tyranny.”* — **Pascal**

*“Power is ever stealing from the many to the few.”* — **Wendell Phillips**

*“Power, like the diamond, dazzles the beholder, and also the wearer; it dignifies meanness; it magnifies littleness; to what is contemptible, it gives authority; to what is low, exaltation.”* — **Charles Caleb Colton**

*“Even legal punishments lose all appearance of justice, when too strictly inflicted on men compelled by the last extremity of distress to incur them.”* — **Junius**

*“Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probable reason why so few engage in it.”* — **Henry Ford**

*“Thought engenders thought. Place one idea upon paper, another will follow it, and still another, until you have written a page... Learn to think, and you will learn to write; the more you think, the better you will express your ideas.”* — **G.A. Sala**

*“Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.”* — **William Shakespeare**

*“All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, till they take root in our personal experience.”* — **Goethe**

*“The key to every man is his thought.”* — **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

## **Paraphrasing and Clarifying Substantive Texts**

In the next section we focus on three substantive passages that have influenced the thinking of many reflective persons. Your job is to re-capture the thinking within the passage by expressing it in your own words. After you paraphrase the passages sentence by sentence, you can read our sample interpretations. We then provide examples of how one might explicate the thesis of the passage using the clarification format previously introduced. Construct your own explication before reading our example. The appendices include additional models you can use for further practice.

### **Paraphrasing and Clarifying Substantive Texts**

Directions: For each of the three texts that follow, test your grasp of the passages by putting them into your own words. Compare your writing with the sample interpretation that follows the First Exercise: Paraphrasing Section.

### **Man's Search for Meaning**

**Background Information:** The following excerpt is taken from Viktor E. Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959). Dr. Frankl, a psychiatrist and neurologist who was imprisoned at Auschwitz and other Nazi prisons, developed a theory of "logotherapy" which "focuses its attention upon mankind's groping for a higher meaning in life."

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him... [People] lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves; they are caught in that situation which I have called the 'existential vacuum.'... This existential vacuum manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom... Not a few cases of suicide can be traced back to this existential vacuum... Sometimes the frustrated will to meaning is vicariously compensated for by a will to power, including the most primitive form of the will to power, the will to money. In other cases, the place of frustrated will to meaning is taken by the will to pleasure... Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each meaning is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering* for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible... (pp. 166-172).

### **First Exercise: Paraphrasing**

*What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him...*

**PARAPHRASE:**

*[People] lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves; they are caught in that situation which I have called the 'existential vacuum.'*...

**PARAPHRASE:**

*This existential vacuum manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom... Not a few cases of suicide can be traced back to this existential vacuum...*

**PARAPHRASE:**

*Sometimes the frustrated will to meaning is vicariously compensated for by a will to power, including the most primitive form of the will to power, the will to money. In other cases, the place of frustrated will to meaning is taken by the will to pleasure...*

**PARAPHRASE:**

*Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each meaning is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible...*

**PARAPHRASE:**

### **Compare Your Writing: Sample Interpretation**

*What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him...*

**Paraphrase:** People should not strive to be without stress and challenge. Rather they should actively seek important purposes. People shouldn't spend their time and energy simply trying to relieve pressure in their lives. Instead they should use their energy seeking out pursuits that are significant and important to them.

*[People] lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves; they are caught in that situation which I have called the 'existential vacuum'...*

**Paraphrase:** People often do not see that there is anything significant in life. Their minds are not actively pursuing anything interesting, anything that gives them deep meaning in their lives. Life seems barren and unfulfilling.

*This existential vacuum manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom... Not a few cases of suicide can be traced back to this existential vacuum...*

**Paraphrase:** This lack of significant meaning in one's life often leads to tedium, dullness, apathy, indifference. Even suicide is sometimes caused by a state of "empty existence."

*Sometimes the frustrated will to meaning is vicariously compensated for by a will to power, including the most primitive form of the will to power, the will to money. In other cases, the place of frustrated will to meaning is taken by the will to pleasure...*

**Paraphrase:** Sometimes when people fail to pursue important meanings and goals, their energy is used instead in the pursuit of control and domination. Some even resort to the most crude type of power, that of pursuing wealth simply for the sake of wealth. In still other persons, the failure to pursue important objectives is covered over by a vain pursuit of pleasure.

*Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each meaning is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible...*

**Paraphrase:** In the final analysis people should not try to figure out *the* meaning of life. Instead they should answer the questions: “What meaning can I give to my own life? What important meaning can I create for myself? What goals can I pursue that make my life important?” In short, people have to answer to the world for their actions. Each of us must justify how and why we are living our lives the way we do. And each of us is responsible to pursue important goals, to live in a conscientious way. Each of us is accountable for the life-forming decisions we make. Each of us is responsible for our own well-being.

### **Second Exercise: Thesis of Man's Search for Meaning**

Directions: Complete the following four tasks: (1) State the thesis of the passage in your own words. (2) Elaborate the thesis. (3) Give one or more examples of the thesis. (4) Illustrate the thesis with a metaphor or analogy.

#### **Statement of Thesis**

The only way to live a truly meaningful life is to seek important purposes and live in accordance with those purposes.

#### **Elaboration of Thesis**

Most people have no sense of how to find important meanings for their lives. Instead, they are bored with life. They ask questions like: “What is the meaning of life?” In its place they should ask, “What important meanings can I create for myself?” In short, people tend to look outside themselves for pre-designed meaning instead of selecting from a range of challenging and important goals for themselves.

#### **Exemplification of Thesis**

Rather than seeking objectives that would be truly fulfilling, people often pursue power, money, fun, and excitement. When people pursue power, for example, they funnel their energy into that which enables them to control other people, to see themselves as superior to others. This substitutes for a truly fulfilling meaning in life. But when people develop meaningful, rational purposes, they become much more satisfied with life. Many teenagers lack important purposes. They are looking for instant gratification. They are seeking fun and excitement in superficial relationships and

events. Because this lifestyle doesn't lead to any important meaning in their lives, they often turn to drugs and alcohol for cheap thrills. Alternatively, when teenagers pursue activities and goals that are important to them (e.g., sports, photography, writing, political causes, drama) they find true meaning in their lives. They aren't bored with life. They don't need to be accepted by their peer group. They use their energy to create something they see as important to them personally.

### **Illustration of Thesis**

Seeking important meanings in life is like seeking a pearl in an oyster. The oyster is like the stuff of life that can keep us from identifying important goals, the stuff that gets in the way of the prize that is worth the seeking. It is the dull grayish brown substance that easily entraps us. We have to work through the oyster to get to the pearl. We have to work through difficulties to find what is really important to us. But the reward is brilliant and shiny, and true (to who and what we are).

### **History of the Great American Fortunes**

**Background Understandings:** In 1909, Gustavus Myers wrote a three-volume history of the great American fortunes. At the time Myers was attempting to understand and then explain how the wealthiest people in the country obtained their wealth. In his book, he focuses neither on extraordinary ability or hard work on the part of these people, nor does he directly connect this vast wealth to greed or lack of ethics. Rather he contends that “the great fortunes are the natural, logical outcome of a system.”...[a system producing] “the utter despoilment of the many for the benefit of a few.” The result is a “natural” economic and human result. As he put it, “...our plutocrats rank as nothing more or less than so many unavoidable creations of a set of processes which must imperatively produce a certain set of results.” The following excerpt is from the first chapter of his book, *History of the Great American Fortunes*:

The noted private fortunes of settlement and colonial times were derived from the ownership of land and the gains of trading. ... Throughout the colonies were scattered lords of the soil who had vast territorial domains over which they exercised an arbitrary and, in some portions of the colonies, a feudal sway... Nearly all the colonies were settled by chartered companies, organized for purely commercial purposes and the success of which largely depended upon the emigration which they were able to promote.

These corporations were vested with enormous powers and privileges which, in effect, constituted them as sovereign rulers...

As the demands of commerce had to be sustained at any price, a system was at once put into operation of gathering in as many of the poorer English class as could be impressed upon some pretext, and shipping them over to be held as bonded laborers. Penniless and lowly Englishmen, arrested and convicted for any one of the multitude of offenses then provided for severely in law, were transported as criminals or sold into the colonies as slaves for a term of years. The English courts were busy grinding out human material for the Virginia Plantation... No voice was raised in protest (pp. 11–12).

### **First Exercise: Paraphrasing**

*The noted private fortunes of settlement and colonial times were derived from the ownership of land and the gains of trading.*

**PARAPHRASE:**



*...Through-out the colonies were scattered lords of the soil who had vast territorial domains over which they exercised an arbitrary and, in some portions of the colonies, a feudal sway...*

**PARAPHRASE:**

*Nearly all the colonies were settled by chartered companies, organized for purely commercial purposes and the success of which largely depended upon the emigration which they were able to promote.*

**PARAPHRASE:**

*These corporations were vested with enormous powers and privileges which, in effect, constituted them as sovereign rulers...*

**PARAPHRASE:**

*As the demands of commerce had to be sustained at any price, a system was at once put into operation of gathering in as many of the poorer English class as could be impressed upon some pretext, and shipping them over to be held as bonded laborers.*

**PARAPHRASE:**

*Penniless and lowly Englishmen, arrested and convicted for any one of the multitude of offenses then provided for severely in law, were transported as criminals or sold into the colonies as slaves for a term of years. The English courts were busy grinding out human material for the Virginia Plantation...*

**PARAPHRASE:**

*No voice was raised in protest.*

**PARAPHRASE:**

### **Compare Your Writing: Sample Interpretation**

*The noted private fortunes of settlement and colonial times were derived from the ownership of land and the gains of trading.*

**PARAPHRASE:** During the time of the early American colonies, the wealthy people got their wealth from owning land and engaging in trade.

*...Through-out the colonies were scattered lords of the soil who had vast territorial domains over which they exercised an arbitrary and, in some portions of the colonies, a feudal sway...*

**PARAPHRASE:** Everywhere in the colonies there were people with huge estates so large and powerful, so great that these land owners were virtual "lords" who could command almost anything they wanted of the people who lived in their province, as medieval lords could.

*Nearly all the colonies were settled by chartered companies, organized for purely commercial purposes and the success of which largely depended upon the emigration which they were able to promote.*

**PARAPHRASE:** Almost all the people who took over these territories from the Native Americans did so through licensed companies. These companies were concerned with nothing but profit. Their success depended on getting people to come from other lands.

*These corporations were vested with enormous powers and privileges which, in effect, constituted them as sovereign rulers...*

**PARAPHRASE:** The companies so formed had stupendous power and rights that rendered them autonomous and virtually self-governing.

*As the demands of commerce had to be sustained at any price, a system was at once put into operation of gathering in as many of the poorer English class as could be impressed upon some pretext, and shipping them over to be held as bonded laborers.*

**PARAPHRASE:** Because profit was their only ultimate motive and the system they set up required cheap labor, England began the practice of devising excuses that justified forcing poor people to come to the colonies as near slaves.

*Penniless and lowly Englishmen, arrested and convicted for any one of the multitude of offenses then provided for severely in law, were transported as criminals or sold into the colonies as slaves for a term of years. The English courts were busy grinding out human material for the Virginia Plantation...*

**PARAPHRASE:** The English court-system became the economic vehicle that enabled the wealthy colonial companies and their masters to gather and use masses of poor people for their vested interests. The system was set up so that for any number of reasons the poor could be found guilty of any of a number of offenses and punished severely. This punishment often consisted of sending them off to the colonies as slaves for a specified number of years.

*No voice was raised in protest.*

**PARAPHRASE:** Virtually no one objected to this cruel and unethical system.

## **Second Exercise: Thesis of the *History of the Great American Fortunes***

### **Statement of Thesis**

A minority of persons in the early American colonies acquired vast fortunes, land, and power through the exploitation of poor people in England.

### **Elaboration of Thesis**

The dominant form of government in the early American colonies was not democracy but something more like feudal oligarchy. Relatively few wealthy colonists were at the pinnacle of a system of powerful licensed companies that had acquired from the English King complete power and authority to rule a region and the people in it. Profit was the overriding end. The systematic denial of human rights for those manipulated and used by the powerful was standard practice and went virtually unquestioned.

### **Exemplification of Thesis**

For example, people were accused and convicted of petty crimes in England for the tacit purpose of providing virtual slaves for the colonies. (These convicts were sentenced into forced labor for the companies authorized by the King.)

### **Illustration of Thesis**

To better understand this phenomenon, we might consider the legal institution of slavery in America from the 1600s until the 1800s. Innocent Africans were rounded up and sold into slavery for one explicit purpose — the pursuit of wealth by land-owners. By using free forced labor, the rich got richer and the slaves were denied their most fundamental human rights. The same denial of rights was inherent in the system that convicted poor people in England to a life of virtual slavery to American land-owners.

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