Paraphrasing Arguments

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Introduction

What does it mean to *understand* what you've read?

It can't simply consist of a *feeling* that you've understood the reading. Sometimes, we feel *confident* that we understand the passage. We frequently experience this as an "Aha!" feeling or a "Eureka!" moment, though it's often more subtle, e.g. passing over a passage without further ado. However, confidence is often *overconfidence*. You might *feel* that you understand a passage without actually understanding it. Other times, you might feel *confusion* or *anxiety* about your understanding of a passage. However, this could just as easily be "*underconfidence*"—sometimes, we've underestimated our degree of comprehension. Thus, your feelings shouldn't be the final arbiter of whether or not you understand a passage.

Rather, your ability to *paraphrase* a passage is a much more reliable guide. Paraphrasing or note taking is frequently your most direct transition from reading to writing. Sadly, there's a good chance that nobody has told you what distinguishes good paraphrasing from bad paraphrasing. Alternatively, if they've told you anything at all, there's an even better chance that it's completely wrong! But if paraphrasing is indeed the

mark of understanding, this means that *nobody has told you when you understand what you've read.*

Think about that. Repeat it aloud. Think about it again.

With this in mind, my task is to teach you some reliable strategies for paraphrasing, and discuss those strategies' implications for becoming a more skilled and careful reader. This may sound incredibly pedantic, but trust me: none of us read as well as we could (myself included), for the "natural" or "intuitive" way of reading isn't the *smartest* way to read.

The general idea behind paraphrasing is simple to comprehend, but slightly more difficult to do: you *interpret the author as offering deductively valid arguments.*

Comprehension check. What is a deductively valid argument? How important is this concept to this course? How much will you be penalized if you fail to correctly define this concept?

Now, very rarely do authors actually *explicitly* reason deductively. Doesn't this mean that any paraphrase is distorting their views? Not necessarily. Imagine that someone is reading something that you wrote. Would you want them to interpret your reasoning as charitably as possible? Obviously, you would! But what does it mean to interpret one's reasoning *charitably*? It means that someone should interpret you as engaging in the *best* reasoning possible, and no reasoning is stronger than deductively valid reasoning.

So, the most charitable readers construe their interlocutors' reasoning deductively. However, charity must be balanced with *faithfulness* to the original text. Sometimes authors clearly do not intend to reason deductively. There are at least two occasions for this:

(1) The author is not trying to provide reasons for a position, or
(2) The author is providing inductive reasons for a position.

In the first case, then some other paraphrasing strategy is more apt. For instance, the plot of a novel probably shouldn't be paraphrased as a set of interconnected deductive arguments. In the second case, we lose very little by rendering the author's reasoning as exclusively deductive. I'll discuss this when we get into *criticizing* arguments. For now, note that deductive reasoning is less messy than inductive reasoning, so we'll get a tidier paraphrase if we stick to deductive reasoning.

Let's take stock. Understanding involves good paraphrasing, and good paraphrasing is interpreting the author as offering deductively valid arguments. In what follows, I'll walk you through how one interprets the author as offering deductively valid arguments.

1. Common argument patterns

The most fundamental aspect of the paraphrasing process is *fitting premises and conclusions into common argument patterns.* We'll discuss these common argument patterns below, but the key is that *all* of them are *deductively valid.* Hence, if you can fit an author's premises and conclusions into common argument patterns, you succeed in interpreting the author as offering deductively valid arguments. Hence, if you can fit an

author's premises and conclusions into common argument patterns, you offer a good paraphrase.

Quite naturally, this raises two questions. First, what are "common argument patterns"? Second, how does one "fit" the premises and conclusions into these patterns? There are many argument patterns, but I want you to focus on five. Eventually, we'll mostly be looking at passages from philosophers, whose reasoning tends to be rather elaborate. However, even most philosophy can be characterized in terms of these five patterns. Needless to say, this works quite well in other areas that are often less fancy: political arguments, legal documents, popular expositions of science, etc.

1.1.   Modus ponens

Consider the following:

John Example

If John knows that he should take out the trash tomorrow, then John will take out the trash tomorrow.

John knows that he should take out the trash tomorrow.

Therefore, John will take out the trash tomorrow.

This is an example of a general pattern of inference called *modus ponens*. Its general form is:

Modus Ponens

If p, then q.

p.

Therefore, q.

So, "fitting" part of a text is showing that you can "translate" or "map" the letters onto specific propositions. In this particular case, you can do this by setting up the following translation scheme:

Translation Scheme

p	John knows that he should take out the trash tomorrow.
q	John will take out the trash tomorrow.

If you substitute p and q in the *Modus Ponens* pattern according to this scheme, you will end up with the *John Example*. So that's the fit.

1.2.   Modus tollens

Compare the *John Example* with the following:

Anne Example

If Anne knows that she should take out the trash tomorrow, then she will take out the trash tomorrow.

Anne will not take out the trash tomorrow.

Therefore, Anne does not know that she should take out the trash tomorrow.

This is an example of a pattern known as *modus tollens*. Its general pattern is:

Modus Tollens

If p, then q.

It is not the case for q.

Therefore, it is not the case that p.

As before, you can set up a translation scheme. This is left as an exercise below.

1.3. Hypothetical syllogism

Next, consider this:

> *Tom Example*
> If Tom makes his double chocolate cake, then the dinner party will be a success.
> <u>If the dinner party is a success, then the guests will be happy.</u>
> Therefore, if Tom makes his double chocolate cake, then the guests will be happy.

This is an example of a pattern known as *modus tollens*. Its general pattern is:

> *Hypothetical syllogism*
> If p, then q.
> <u>If q, then r.</u>
> Therefore, if p, then r.

As before, you can set up a translation scheme. This is left as an exercise below.

1.4. Disjunctive syllogism

> *Beth Example*
> Either Beth takes Calculus or Beth takes Basic Painting.
> <u>Beth does not take Basic Painting.</u>
> Therefore, Beth takes Calculus.

This is an example of a pattern known as *disjunctive syllogism*:

> *Disjunctive Syllogism*
> Either p or q.
> <u>It is not the case that q.</u>
> Therefore, p.

As before, you can set up a translation scheme. This is left as an exercise below.

1.5. Instantiation

> *Socrates Example*
> All humans are mortal.
> <u>Socrates is a human.</u>
> Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

> *Instantiation*
> All F's are G's.
> <u>a is an F.</u>
> Therefore, a is a G.

Equivalently:

> *Instantiation*
> If a thing is an F, then it is a G.
> <u>a is an F.</u>
> Therefore, a is a G.

Instantiation is a little different than the other patterns in that its pattern depends on the *components* of the sentence (the subject and the predicate) rather than the *whole* sentence. We have represented this by using slightly different letters. Capital letters such as F and

G represent <u>predicates</u>, while lowercase letters from *a* through *o* represent <u>names</u>, paradigmatically of people, places, and things. (We keep the letters *p* through s for propositions, and save *t* through *z* for the later in the course.) Thus, the translation scheme for the *Socrates Example* is:

Name		Predicates	
a	Socrates	*F*	human
		G	mortal

1.6. Exercises

1. Using the Anne, Tom, and Beth Examples, set up translation schemes for modus tollens, hypothetical syllogism, and disjunctive syllogism. In other words, for each of these examples, what is *p* and what is *q* (and, in one case, what is *r*)?
2. Come up with examples of your own—preferably of arguments that you accept—that fit each of the five argument patterns.
3. Each of the passages below is an example of (at least) one of the five argument patterns, but it has a *hidden premise* or a *hidden conclusion*. State the pattern with which the passage fits, and restructure the argument so that all of its premises are explicit.

    Example: Since today is Tuesday, John will go to work.
    Answer: *Modus ponens*
    If today is Tuesday, John will go to work.
    <u>Today is Tuesday.</u>
    Therefore, John will go to work.

    a. Because you didn't order soup, you must have ordered salad.
    b. Anyone who believes that personhood begins at conception is against abortion. So Paul Ryan is against abortion.
    c. If you leave that wound untreated, it will get infected. That could lead to gangrene.
    d. The Red Sox won't win the American League East this year. So the Yankees will.
    e. Live life to the fullest, as every day could be our last.

2. Paraphrasing in action

So far, I've been giving you some building blocks for effective paraphrasing. You're now in a position to assemble those building blocks into a paraphrase—or better yet, into a rigorous understanding of a challenging philosophical passage. Let's first look at the philosophical passage, then paraphrase it.

2.1. Passage

The following passage is from philosopher Peter Singer's well-cited essay, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."

I begin with the assumption that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. I think most people will agree about this, although one may reach the same view by different routes […] My next point is this: if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent. This principle seems almost as uncontroversial as the last one […but…] The uncontroversial appearance of the principle just stated is deceptive. If it were acted upon […] our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed […] The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it. When we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look "well-dressed" we are not providing for any important need. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief. By doing so, we would be preventing another person from starving. It follows from what I have said earlier that we ought to give money away, rather than spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm. To do so is not charitable, or generous. Nor is it the kind of act which philosophers and theologians have called "supererogatory"—an act which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do. On the contrary, we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so (Singer 1972, 231-235).

So how do we go about paraphrasing this passage, in such a way that we understand it? In going through this process, I'll identify two major stages in this process: (2.2) identifying the premises and conclusions, and (2.3) fitting these premises and conclusions into common argument patterns. This is for teaching purposes; in real life, these two things aren't so neatly divided. By having this slightly artificial, but more finely grained account of the process, you can get a better sense of what aspects of your paraphrasing need work.

> **Food for thought.** One of the hardest things about teaching critical thinking is that the relevant thought processes are frequently automatic and unconscious. Consequently, I'm always looking for subtle distinctions in the process of critical thinking that I've missed. As you read this, reflect on your how you're navigating the text. Are there parts of this process that I've overlooked but that might be useful to other students to keep in mind as they learn how to paraphrase? If so, let me know! You'll be acknowledged in the next draft of this tutorial.

2.2.   Identify premises and conclusions

At this point, you've already learned about how to *recognize* arguments. Essentially, you look for premise- and conclusion-indicators. At this stage, just set up one part of your notes for premises and another for conclusions. Also, note that I'm keeping the original language from the passage. Later, I'll tweak the language to get a smoother paraphrase.

Premises	**Conclusion**
1. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.	5. We ought to give money away, rather than spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm.
2. If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.	
3. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief.	
4. By doing so, we would be preventing another person from starving.	

Comprehension check. First, can you identify the premise- and conclusion-indicators in Singer's original text? Which of the premises in the left column above does not have a premise-indicator?

2.3. Fitting the premises and conclusions into common argument patterns.

In Section 2.2, we have a bunch of premises and a conclusion, but we don't yet see how they fit together, i.e. *how* the premises *support* the conclusion. We get that insight by fitting these premises into common argument patterns. There is no recipe for doing this; you simply need to get comfortable with the argument patterns, and massaging the text so that it preserves the original meaning while still fitting into a pattern.

I will give you some rules of thumb that should make this process easier. As before, I'm presenting them in a linear, isolated way for teaching purposes, but frequently, these strategies are automatic and simultaneous.

Step 1. Identify the main logical operators of your premises and conclusions.
Step 2. Form hypotheses about the arguments in the passage based on which premises would fit into a common argument pattern.
Step 3. Test those hypotheses against the original text, as well as the list of premises and conclusions you identified in Step 1.
Step 4. Repeat Steps 1-3 until you have an interpretation of the text that fits one or more common argument patterns.

Attention! These four steps are *really* important. Write them down just to help you remember them. When you do the exercises below, *look* at these four steps.

Suppose you have an argument that consists of two premises that are conditional statements (i.e. "if-then" statements), and a conclusion that is also a conditional statement. There's a good chance (though it's not inevitable) that this argument is a hypothetical syllogism. This is because hypothetical syllogisms are the only arguments with two conditional statements for premises and a conditional statement for a conclusion. This gives you a good working hypothesis for how to paraphrase the text. I stress that this is a *hypothesis*, which needs to be confirmed by re-reading the passage, and seeing if it captures the author's intended meaning.

> **Comprehension check.** Of course, this point applies just as well to other argument patterns. Name the argument pattern which has: (a) one conditional statement as a premise and negated propositions as both a further premise and a conclusion, (b) one conditional statement as a premise and non-negated propositions as both a further premise and a conclusion, (c) a universal quantifier (e.g. "all," or "a thing") as one of its premises, and (d) one disjunction as a premise, one negation as a premise, and one non-negated claim as a conclusion[1].

We can use this to great effect in the Singer passage. For example, look at Premise 2. It is a conditional statement:

> 2. If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.

So now, we have to figure out what other premises might fit with it into a common argument pattern. Note that there are two ways of glossing Premise 2's form:

- If *p*, then *q*. (Call this the *first gloss.*)

Or:

- If a thing is *F*, then it is *G*. (Call this the *second gloss.*)

The first gloss of Premise 2 would suggest modus ponens, modus tollens, or hypothetical syllogism; the second would suggest instantiation. How do we decide? Well, first, let's look at how these two translation schemes would pan out.

First Gloss		Second Gloss	
Proposition	*Translation*	*Predicate*	*Translation*
p	It is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.	*F*	[is] bad and in our power to prevent from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.
q	We ought, morally, to prevent that thing from happening.	*G*	[is] a state of affairs that we ought, morally, to prevent.

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[1] Answers: (a) modus tollens, (b) both modus ponens and instantiation, (c) instantiation, and (d) disjunctive syllogism.

If the first gloss is correct, then we should find Singer asserting *p* (if he is arguing via modus ponens), the negation of *q* (modus tollens), or something of the form if *q* then *r* (hypothetical syllogism). If the second gloss is correct, we should find him claiming that something, *a,* is *F* (instantiation). Look back at our four premises. Premise 1 *almost* fits the demands of the second gloss. That would suggest the following:

> *Paraphrase A*
> 1. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
> 2. If a thing is bad and in our power to prevent it from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then that thing is a state of affairs we ought, morally, to prevent from happening.
> C. We ought, morally, to prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care from happening.

For those of you who are keeping score at home, our translation scheme is revised accordingly:

~~First Gloss~~		Second Gloss	
~~Proposition~~	*~~Translation~~*	*Predicate*	*Translation*
~~*p*~~	~~It is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.~~	*F*	[is] bad and in our power to prevent from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.
~~*q*~~	~~We ought, morally, to prevent that thing from happening.~~	*G*	[is] a state of affairs that we ought, morally, to prevent from happening.
		Name	*Translation*
		a	Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care

Now, we don't quite have an instantiation, because Premise 1 satisfies only part of what's required by *F* in our translation scheme. That scheme requires not only that a thing be *bad*, but <u>also</u> that it be *preventable without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance.* Premise 1 only satisfies the first of these requirements.

At this point, we can make another hypothesis about the passage: Singer will claim or presuppose the following:

> (*Hypothesis 1*) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are in our power to prevent from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

If he does, and appears to use this with Premises 1 and 2 to argue by instantiation, then our hypotheses are confirmed. But now look at Premises 3 and 4 from above:

> 3. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief.
> 4. By doing so, we would be preventing another person from starving.

While they do not use *exactly* this language, they seem to be saying something very similar to our hypothesis. For instance, Premise 3's reference to "famine relief" is similar,

but not identical to our hypothesis' reference to "preventing suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care." Similarly, Premise 3's reference to "sacrificing anything significant" is similar, but not identical to, our hypothesis' reference to "sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance." On the other hand, there are differences. For instance, our hypothesis says nothing about "continuing to wear our old clothes."

At this point, we have two options. We can give a more *detailed* reading of Singer in which his argument is fundamentally about the clothes that we wear and only about famine relief. Or we can give a *broader* reading of Singer that imputes more general ambitions to Singer. On the broader reading, rather than arguing about which clothes that we wear, Singer is arguing about preventing death and suffering; rather than arguing only about famine relief, he is including other kinds of relief, which also involves shelter and medical care.

For now, I'll use the broader reading—mostly because it makes for a shorter and tidier paraphrase:

Paraphrase B:

1*. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad, and are in our power to prevent from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

2. If a thing is bad and in our power to prevent it from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then that thing is a state of affairs we ought, morally, to prevent from happening.

C. We ought, morally, to prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care from happening.

1* simply combines our hypothesis and the original Premise 1 so that Singer's reasoning fits an instantiation argument. So, while we didn't say *exactly* what Singer said (because we didn't use Premises 3 and 4 *verbatim*), the gist of what he says is there.

Now, compare Paraphrase B with the original passage in Section 2.1. It has many of the features that we normally associate with a good paraphrase. It's shorter and simpler. It omits details that aren't absolutely essential[2]. It's clearer. So here is paraphrasing in a nutshell: *the fitting of a passage's premises and conclusions into one or more common argument patterns.*

2.4. The more detailed reading

In many contexts, the broader reading is fine. If you had to write an abstract of Singer's paper, the broader reading would be especially useful. However, you may want a more detailed paraphrase, in which you use Premises 3 and 4 (or something like them). In that case, you simply repeat our four-step process, but force yourself to use all of the premises (or something close to them). Here, it's worth noting that Singer seems committed to the following:

3*. If it is in our power to continue to wear our old clothes, and instead give money to famine relief, then suffering and death from lack of food is in

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[2] Have you ever thought about what "absolutely essential" means in this context? The preceding suggests—quite plausibly—that it means "essential to interpreting an author's argument as deductively valid."

our power to prevent from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

This seems to capture the gist of Premises 3 and 4. Now, we already know from the broader reading that Singer needs to assert the following:

(*Hypothesis 1*) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are in our power to prevent from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

Indeed that was the exact same hypothesis as in the previous section. But looking Hypothesis 1 and 3*, we're getting awfully close to a modus ponens that looks something like this:

3*.   If it is in our power to continue to wear our old clothes, and instead give money to famine relief, then suffering and death from lack of food is in our power to prevent from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

4*.   It is in our power to continue to wear our old clothes, and instead give money to famine relief.

C2.   Suffering and death from lack of food is in our power to prevent from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

Note that C2 is just our hypothesis restricted to food-related suffering and death (no shelter or medical care). Furthermore, it seems clear that Singer holds that 4* is true of many people, particularly those in affluent countries.

But now, we still need to weave Premises 1 and 2 into the more detailed reading. We just have to tweak these two premises, omitting references to shelter and medical care, and we can have all four premises working together. We thus have a paraphrase consisting of two interrelated arguments:

Paraphrase C:
1ˢᵗ Argument

3*.   If it is in our power to continue to wear our old clothes, and instead give money to famine relief, then it is in our power to prevent suffering and death from lack of food from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

4*.   It is in our power to continue to wear our old clothes, and instead give money to famine relief.

C2.   It is in our power to prevent suffering and death from lack of food from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

2ⁿᵈ Argument

C2.   It is in our power to prevent suffering and death from lack of food from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

1.   Suffering and death from lack of food is bad.

2.   If a thing is bad and in our power to prevent it from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then that <u>thing is a state of affairs we ought, morally, to prevent from happening.</u>

C3.   We ought, morally, to prevent suffering and death from lack of food from happening.

Note that C2 is the conclusion of the 1st Argument, and a premise in the 2nd. We call such propositions *intermediate conclusions* or *sub-conclusions*.

Paraphrase C gives us a *deeper* understanding of Singer's passage Paraphrase B, since the 1st Argument sheds light on why he believes that it's in our power to prevent suffering and death of a certain kind. However, Paraphrase C also provides a *narrower* understanding of Singer's passage than Paraphrase B, since the former focuses only on his claims about *famine* and not at all on medical care or shelter.

2.5. Exercises

1. Provide a "Paraphrase D" that is as deep as Paraphrase C but as broad as Paraphrase B.

    (Here's a hint to get you started: The antecedent of 3* states:

    > It is in our power to continue to wear our old clothes, and instead give money to famine relief.

    Replace that with:

    > It is in our power to give most of our money to humanitarian relief efforts.

    How does this revised antecedent allow you to include Singer's ideas about shelter and medical care in your paraphrase?)

2. Using the four-step process described above, paraphrase the following:

    > We see that some things lacking cognition, viz. natural bodies, act for the sake of an end. This is apparent from the fact that they always or very frequently act in the same way in order to bring about that which is best, and from this it is clear that it is not by chance, but by design, that they attain the end.
    >
    > But things lacking cognition tend toward an end only if they are directed by something that has cognition and intelligence, in the way that an arrow is directed by an archer. Therefore, there is something intelligent by which all natural things are ordered to an end.
    > (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q2, a3, response).

Summary

- Our objective was to discuss what's involved in understanding a text.
- The ability to paraphrase a passage is a good criterion of understanding, but few people discuss what's involved in good paraphrasing.
- A good paraphrase is both charitable and faithful to an author. Charity is best achieved by interpreting the author as providing deductively valid arguments.
- In order to interpret authors as providing deductively valid arguments, it is useful to fit their premises and conclusions into common argument patterns.

- There are five common argument patterns: modus ponens, modus tollens, hypothetical syllogism, disjunctive syllogism, and instantiation.
- In order to paraphrase, engage in the following four-step process:
  - *Step 1. Identify the main logical operators of your premises and conclusions.*
  - *Step 2. Form hypotheses about the arguments in the passage based on which premises would fit into a common argument pattern.*
  - *Step 3. Test those hypotheses against the original text, as well as the list of premises and conclusions you identified in Step 1.*
  - *Step 4. Repeat Steps 1-3 until you have an interpretation of the text that fits one or more common argument patterns.*

Singer, Peter (1972), "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (3):229-243.