Teaching Students to Summarize

By following several simple precepts, teachers can help their students learn to select important ideas and to condense text.

Students need special instruction in summarizing, because writing a summary is very different from other kinds of writing. Most writing requires the generation of main ideas and details and the careful planning of content and structure. Summarizing, however, is based on material that has already been written. The summary writer must decide what to include, what to eliminate, how to reword or reorganize information, and how to ensure that the summary is true to the original's meaning.

Teaching students to summarize is well worth the effort. Summarizing can help students to understand text and even to recognize when the meaning is unclear. In addition, the effort to identify main ideas while summarizing can help students remember those ideas (Murrell and Surber 1987).

Factors That Influence Summarizing

At least two types of thinking are needed for summarization. The first is a *selection* process: judgments must be made about what text information should be included or rejected. The second is a *reduction* process: ideas must be condensed by substituting general ideas for lower level and more detailed ones (Johnson 1983).

Several factors influence these thinking processes. First, the characteristics of the text are important. It is easier to select important ideas from certain types of text, such as narratives, than from others, such as expositions. Also, the longer the text, the more selection and condensation are required. And the more complex the text, the more judgments are needed to decide which ideas are important.

Second, the presence or absence of the text while summarizing can influence the necessary thinking. If students are allowed to look at the text while summarizing, they will have more "mental space" for the selection and condensation processes. If the text is absent, text may be reduced for the wrong reason—simple forgetting, rather than deliberate elimination.

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Finally, the purposes of the summary itself affect the thinking needed to produce one. Summaries fall into two broad categories: those produced for oneself (writer-based summaries) and those produced for others (reader-based summaries). These two types of summaries are typically produced in different ways (Hidi and Anderson 1987).

A writer-based summary is written to help the writer understand a text or to provide a written record of important parts of a text. In these cases, the writer is usually unfamiliar with the text. He or she is likely to process small bits of text while writing, without much concern about grammatical errors, sentence form, or length.

A reader-based summary, on the other hand, is produced for someone else. Its purpose varies from simply demonstrating one's ability to summarize (as for a school assignment) to trying to stimulate interest in a text (as in an abstract of an article). Here, the summary writer must be quite familiar with the text. The writer's strategy would probably require reading through the text several times, then writing a summary based on large chunks or on all of it, with considerable concern for grammar, sentence form, and length.

How Summarizing Skills Develop

There is no doubt that people improve at summarizing as they grow older.

However, while good summarizers are invariably older, poor summarizers may be found at any age.

Perhaps the major difference between adults' and children's summarizing skills is the ability to select the important ideas in a text (Garner in press). Early elementary school children know that a summary should be shorter than the original text; but in writing summaries, they are confused about what to include. They focus on unusual ideas rather than on important ones. By grade 5, children mention that a summary should include important points, but they don't actually include those points in their summaries. In fact, the ability to summarize develops so slowly that even high school students are not good at it (Brown and Day 1983, Garner 1982, Hare and Borchardt 1984). Garner (1985) found that 9th and 11th grade students were more aware than younger children of the need to include important information but still had trouble doing so and that only at the college level did this problem disappear.

Knowing how to condense is also a problem for young children. While they usually reduce text slightly when asked to summarize, they do so by deleting some material and copying the rest. Older children delete material and begin to condense related ideas (Brown and Day 1983, Hahn and Goldman 1983, Winograd 1984). Only adults typically construct general representations and replace specific content in their summaries (Johnson 1983).

The strategy of selecting topic sentences in order to summarize is not within the repertoire of young children. *Creating* such sentences, when they are not explicitly stated in the text, is a problem even for college students. Only expert writers have shown great skill in inventing topic sentences around which they build their summaries (Brown and Day 1983, Garner and McCaleb 1985).

An understanding of the purposes of summarizing also develops late. Older students become aware of how they can use summarization to test and increase comprehension, but younger students are not so sophisticated (Brown and Day 1983).

How Summarizing Has Been Taught

Research shows three trends in the teaching of summarization. One is teaching a set of summarization rules to be applied to texts (Brown and Day 1983). Another is the use of summarizing as a way of monitoring and ensuring comprehension (Palinscar 1985, Palinscar and Brown 1985, Roehler and Duffy 1984). A third, increasingly popular approach is to teach textbook content with the use of summarizing techniques to ensure that the content is understood. Here, graphic organizers such as charts and matrices have been particularly effective (Chicago Board of Education 1984, Jones et al. 1985). A fuller description of these techniques may be found in *Dimensions of Thinking* (Marzano et al. 1988).

What Teachers Can Do

While researchers have been interested in summarizing, this interest has been slow to influence the classroom. Teachers' guides are just beginning to provide guidelines for teaching students to produce summaries (Bereiter et al. 1989).

The following recommendations incorporate the findings of summarization research. These techniques are intended for very young students but are also appropriate for students of any age who have not learned to summarize.

Choose the right text

Text characteristics greatly influence how well students summarize. To ensure that a text is simple enough for beginning summarizers:

- *Choose a short excerpt.* Students can begin summarizing quite early if they work with short text segments. Identifying topic sentences and determining main ideas are easier when students work with short excerpts. As students improve, they can practice on increasingly longer texts.
- *Choose an easy type of text.* Students should first summarize narratives because they are less difficult. Summarization sessions should always be followed by discussions about how the students summarized and what information they considered important and why. Such reflection is richer when students are dealing with a text they readily understand. Once students can summarize narratives, they can move on to more difficult genres.
- *Choose a less complex text.* Students should first summarize texts that have familiar concepts and ideas. These texts should also be well organized so that important text elements are obvious (Armbruster 1984). Once students have a sense of what a well organized text is like, they can more easily learn to summarize difficult texts.

Let students see the text while summarizing

To remember a text and summarize it at the same time may be too much to ask of a beginner. If students can look at the text while writing, they can more easily check their understanding. Later, students may begin to summarize without the text in view.

Stress author importance

The most critical skill in summarizing is to determine what is important in a text. Students must learn that a summary should include information *important to the author of the text*. This point may seem obvious, but it is not usually made clear in classrooms. Teachers often ask students to focus on important information, without clarifying to whom the information should be important—students, teacher, or author. Teachers should also give students clues as to how to determine importance to the author. Armbruster (1984) has summarized signaling devices that authors use to stress importance: introductory statements, topic sentences, summary statements, underlining, italics, pointer phrases, repetition, and so on. Students should practice finding these devices in sample texts.

Teach students to summarize for themselves first

There are many reasons for teaching students to write summaries for themselves (writer-based summaries) before going on to summaries for others (reader-based summaries). First, writer-based summaries are used throughout life for understanding text and for

keeping personal accounts. Second, these summaries are useful as a study tool, where the summarizer need be concerned only with personal study objectives. Third, since they are easier to write, such summaries provide a stepping stone to more formal summarization. Thus, allowing students to write summaries for themselves first is another way to ease the difficulties of writing reader-based summaries.

Extend skills by having students summarize for others

Once students can produce their own summaries, the teacher is ready to move on to reader-based summaries. All the early learning will be useful, because all the skills and strategies needed in writing a summary for oneself are needed in writing a summary for others. A summary for others, however, must be a finished, polished piece of writing. The teacher needs to emphasize four additional considerations to move students from writer-based to reader-based summarization: summary length, knowledge of material, mechanics of writing, and audience.

- *Summary length.* A summary for others may be shorter than a summary for oneself. Allow personal summaries to be longer at first.
- *Knowledge of material.* Although it is important to comprehend the text when writing a summary for one's own use, extensive knowledge of the text is not necessary. If the teacher selects easier texts at first, students will not need to study the text intensely in order to summarize. Later, students can be trained to reread and review material in order to prepare a summary for others.
- *Mechanics of writing.* A summary for oneself is personal and need not be mechanically perfect. In early summaries, teachers should encourage students to concentrate on summarization and not to worry about mechanics. Later, mechanics can be included as part of the proofreading and revision processes always involved in writing for others.
- *Audience.* The main audience of a writer-based summary is the writer. In preparing a summary for oneself, it is important to acknowledge what the author considered important, to eliminate unnecessary material, and to simplify in keeping with personal needs and interests. Once students can write summaries that satisfy their own needs, the needs of others can be emphasized.

Start Early for Success Later

The recommendations offered here are especially appropriate for getting started. Teachers can make the task of summarizing easy enough for a beginner to master the basics, but should then increase the difficulty of the task until students achieve expert status. To foster expert summarizing, teachers should present students with some form of the activity from the earliest years of literacy. Then teachers should continually reinforce summarization skills throughout instruction. By following these precepts, teachers will help their students develop an ability that many adults lack.□

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