



Summarizing and Paraphrasing

Summarizing and paraphrasing are skills that require students to reprocess information and express it in their own words. These skills enhance student comprehension because they require active reading and listening. They also lead to long-term mastery of information as students go beyond simply understanding to being able to express that understanding.

A summary is an overview, in the student's words, of the most important information from reading, lectures, or multi-media sources. Sometimes there is so much information that students get lost in the details; a summary enables them to see the greater picture. A summary is always shorter than the original material. A paraphrase is also written in the student's own words, but it is a restatement of the original information and is therefore as long (or longer) than the original material. A summary is based primarily on main ideas, while a paraphrase includes details.

Teaching Summarizing Skills

Teachers should introduce summarizing by discussing how it is a useful skill outside the classroom. Today's society places a premium on being able to get to the point, and there are many examples in daily work, family, and social life that call for summarizing. Business people want to know the "bottom line," doctors must summarize a condition and course of treatment, attorneys can win cases with good summaries, and newscasters summarize the day's events. We appreciate the friend who gives us a good summary of the movie we are thinking of seeing, but we might not ask his opinion again if all he gives us is a lot of details that are out of sequence.

Just about anything in school can be summarized: a class lecture, an essay, a news article, a movie or filmstrip, an historic event, a scientific process, a short story, or even a varsity basketball game. Keep in mind that the task of summarizing is not easy for students to learn. They need micro-united steps to follow, continuous practice with each step, and consistent feedback and monitoring.

Using Two-Column Notes

In order to write a summary, a student must first identify the main ideas. Begin teaching summarizing skills by using two-column notes as a basis for



creating a simple summary. The main ideas from the left side of the note-taking page form a basic outline; the student turns these main idea phrases into sentences to write a summary. The summary in Example 4A was developed using the notes from “Juvenile Juries” (complete article on page 29). In this instance, the main ideas from the left column and a few supporting details from the right column are turned into sentences to create a concise summary of the original article.

Example 4A

Summary of “Juvenile Juries” (from Example 2B)

Juvenile offenders in Denver are being sentenced by juvenile jurors. The juvenile jurors are popular because offenders feel they receive a fairer sentence than they would receive from a judge. These juries have given sensitive, imagi-

native, and effective judgments. The program is considered successful because kids receive a hearing soon after the arrest, and the district attorney’s office provides good follow-up.

While “Juvenile Juries” easily lends itself to summarizing due to its brevity and one main idea per paragraph, some summaries are more challenging, such as President Clinton’s inaugural address, which is summarized in Example 4B (complete address on page 47).

Example 4B

Summary of Bill Clinton’s First Inaugural Address (from Example 3D)

Americans must assume new responsibilities in a world with problems, including old hatreds, weak economies, and increasing inequality. There are powerful forces remaking our world, including global communications, commerce, and new technology. We should try to use these changes positively.

There are problems we must face in our country, such as not enough work, cost of health care, crime, and children in poverty. To face these problems we must be strong, invest in our people, cut debt, take more responsibility, and reform politics.

Americans must also meet challenges abroad, including problems in the world economy, the environment, the AIDS crisis, and the arms race. To shape world change, Americans must get involved using peaceful diplomacy when possible, and with force when necessary.

President Clinton challenges young Americans to become involved and care for one another. He urges Americans to have energy and hope as we begin the 21st Century.



There are a variety of ways to encourage students to practice writing summaries. Students can use two-column notes from previous lessons to practice writing summaries, or as they take notes, teachers can ask them to use these notes to write a summary. With high school students, teachers can require that students write summaries from lecture notes as a way to develop good habits for study and note review.

Some students may have difficulty organizing the main ideas into logical categories and writing them into a unified paragraph. While it takes practice, it is helpful if students realize a few things about summarizing. First, students must learn that the order of main ideas is flexible once they are taken out of the text. Also, two main ideas may be combined into one sentence, or the last main idea may become the topic sentence of the summary. There is no set formula for determining the order of main ideas, so the best way to teach summarizing is through modeling and class discussion. Example 4C lists the six steps to write a summary.

Example 4C

How to Write a Summary

1. Read the material and distinguish the main ideas from the details.
2. List the main ideas in phrase form.
3. Group the main ideas into logical categories — the order in which you read the main ideas is not always the best order for writing a summary.
4. Turn the main ideas into sentences and combine them into a paragraph using transitional words. Include a topic sentence.
5. Proofread a first draft for punctuation, spelling, and unity.
6. Make a final copy with neat handwriting.

Summarizing requires the application of good, basic writing techniques. Students may need reminders to begin paragraphs with topic sentences and to write in complete sentences. Transitional words are useful for connecting ideas in a summary. See Example 1E on page 13 for some common transitional words.



Using a Variety of Materials

As students develop their summarizing skills, teachers should use less-structured material that is longer and more complex for summary practice. Summaries from scientific material may be harder to write than summaries from social studies material, or vice versa, so teachers should be sure to give students practice summarizing material from different subject areas. Here are some suggestions for integrating summarizing skills into classroom work:

1. When reviewing material in class, ask questions that require students to summarize information.
2. Give students prepared summaries as models of what was covered in class during the week.
3. At the end of a lecture, or as a review of an assigned reading, require the class to create a summary through group discussion and write it on the board.
4. Ask students to present oral summaries as reviews of assigned readings or previous lectures.

Literature, such as short stories, biographies, or novels, provides another opportunity for writing summaries. These sources allow students to write plot summaries based on a list of main events. Example 4D is a plot summary of the story “The Christmas I’ll Never Forget” (complete story found on page 31).

Example 4D

Summary of “The Christmas I’ll Never Forget” (from Example 2C)

John M. Horan keeps a pair of refrigerator shelves and puts them under his tree every Christmas because they saved his life. Years ago, when he was flying over Washington State on the way to meet his family at Christmas time, the plane he was in experienced trouble, and he parachuted out. He fell safely to earth and walked in search of a highway. He came to a cabin and waited there for help until the cocoa, his only source of food, ran out. He needed snowshoes to walk for help, so he made them out of shelves from the refrigerator. With the help of the shelves, he was able to walk until hunters rescued him. John Horan considers those shelves — which saved his life — his best Christmas present ever.

Reading or listening to student summaries is one way of knowing which students really understand the content and which need more instruction. Writing summaries on a daily and weekly basis will ensure consistent and



steady review of information, and the summaries can be used later as overviews when studying for a test.

Teaching Paraphrasing Skills

Paraphrasing is the process of restating information in different words. When we paraphrase, we maintain the original meaning, but we say it in our own words. Paraphrasing is an active learning strategy which helps us place information into long-term memory as we move from an understanding level to an active comprehension level. Good paraphrasing skills are necessary to create effective summaries, prepare for tests, answer essay test questions, and avoid plagiarism when researching reports. Paraphrasing includes:

- Replacing difficult vocabulary words or phrases with words the student understands
- Rewriting lengthy or complex sentences into simpler sentences, or combining simple sentences into more interesting, complex sentences
- Explaining concepts and abstract ideas from sentences or passages using more clear and concise wording
- Translating ideas and information into students' own words

Problems with underlying language-processing skills make paraphrasing especially difficult for students with language-based learning disabilities. Weaknesses, particularly at the semantic (word), syntactic (sentence), and discourse (paragraph) levels, minimize the ability to “play” with words. Limited vocabulary and ability to construct complex sentences make it difficult for students to come up with a “different way of saying things” in their own words.

Student Tips for Successful Paraphrasing

1. *Know how to choose and use a dictionary and a thesaurus:* Choose editions which are appropriate to your reading level and which have font styles and sizes that are easy to read. This includes dictionary and thesaurus features incorporated in word-processing software, which are often too advanced for students below grade ten.
2. *Understand the context of what you are paraphrasing:* Read the whole sentence or several sentences of the passage to have at least a general understanding of the context in which words



are being used. Make sure that the synonyms you use in your paraphrased version do not change the meaning of the passage.

3. *Use “semantic” paraphrasing:* Use a thesaurus and/or your own knowledge to replace words in the passage with accurate synonyms. Be sure to check the part of speech of the word you are replacing. How a synonym is used can change the meaning of the word or sentence.
4. *Use “syntactic” paraphrasing:* In addition to replacing key words, change the structure of the original sentences by either inverting the order of sentence parts, breaking them into shorter sentences, or combining simple sentences into compound and complex sentences.
5. *Rewrite the paraphrased version:* Combine the various changes noted above and rewrite the passage in your own words.

Simply asking students to restate something in their own words is not enough. It is important for teachers to model how to paraphrase and give numerous examples. Students need specific instruction in paraphrasing before they can independently apply this skill. The content material used in class lessons is a good source for examples. Teachers should review the portions of the textbook or supplemental reading material that will be used in class and pick out a few sentences or passages that are difficult to comprehend. Paraphrase these selections with the students in class. Discuss options for substituting synonyms and different sentence structures. Then when students read the material, encourage them to substitute the paraphrased versions so they can see how paraphrasing makes difficult reading more accessible.