

IN DEFENCE OF SUMMARIZATION

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Abstract

Teachers both in the high schools and at COB often put little emphasis on the teaching of summarization. Often, they assume that students are able to write summaries, though the research tells us that this is not necessarily so. This article argues that summary writing must be explicitly taught rather than taken for granted and that it is an essential skill that helps students make sense of the variety of materials they must read in college. The importance of teaching summarization and the benefits to students of so doing are affirmed and supported by a review of the literature on the topic.

Teaching students how to write summaries is a task that many teachers view with distaste and even trepidation. Some view it as boring to teach and tedious to grade, so they avoid both as far as possible. However, if teachers become aware of the numerous advantages for students, and of effective methods of teaching it, they might be persuaded to embrace summarization as a crucial skill that their students should practise as often as possible, as part of an integrated reading and writing programme.

In this connection, it is important to note, first, that many students, even at college and university level, have difficulty writing effective summaries, and second, that few students receive instruction in summary-writing even though the tasks given them require the writing of summaries (Hill, 1991). Indeed, it has been shown that students lack summary-writing skills at all grade levels (Brown & Day, 1983). Many teachers of English—and of other subjects—expect or incorrectly assume that students know how to summarize and do not teach summarization though many of the writing activities students are involved in would benefit from summarization skills. For example, students doing research papers tend to copy from sources verbatim because they know no other method of attacking the task. Knudson (1998) contends that college-bound high school students, in particular, should benefit from explicit summarization instruction, thus reducing or eliminating the need for remedial work at the college level. The observation that proficiency is not demonstrated either at high school or college level is a strong indication of the need to teach summarization even at the tertiary level.

Some teaching strategies are, of course, more effective than others. Rather than simply having students underline main points or reading the text numerous times, Friend (2000-2001) asserts that teachers could have students look for repeated references. This is based on the fact that an idea often referred to by other ideas is an important one. Additionally, she suggests teaching students how to generalize by writing a sentence of their own that covers the details of a paragraph or group of paragraphs without becoming too vague. Teachers need to discourage students from copying ideas from a passage and teach them instead to synthesize (not select) ideas and concepts that can be grouped together and expressed in the student's own words. This approach to summarization, according to Friend, extends cognitive capacity and enhances student learning. Barak Rosenthal (1997) also makes a strong case for explicit instruction in

summarization for much the same reasons, arguing that comprehension and writing are complex tasks. Hence, he avers, teachers need to teach cognitive strategies that are specific to writing. One of these strategies is summarization.

Various analyses have been done of the cognitive skills involved in summarization. Three basic elements have been identified. First, there is a selection process involving evaluation of the text, deletion of some information, and retention of other information for inclusion in the summary. Second, material is condensed by substituting super-ordinate concepts for lower-level ones. Third, the remaining material is integrated, combined, and transformed into the final product (Hidi & Anderson, 1986). Thus, it is clear that summarization involves complex, high-order skills; this supports the contention that it has to be explicitly taught.

Summarization may supplement other tasks on the language arts curriculum since, according to Hidi and Anderson (1986), it is different from other composing tasks. The argument is that, instead of generating material, the student performs operations on existing text. This requires more active control in evaluating the relative importance of items and so on. If this is so, then summarization would be an additional or complementary skill in a student's arsenal of language skills.

Researchers also seem to agree that summarization enhances recall and comprehension of content (Bromley & McKeveny, 1986). In this connection, it is important to note that comprehension does not entail summarizing. In other words, a student may be able to understand text without necessarily being able to summarize it. If comprehension and summarizing were synonymous, then it would not be necessary to teach the latter as a separate skill. Various studies such as those by Brown and Day (1983) contend that the ability to write a summary does not automatically follow from either recall or comprehension. Rather, it involves further, conscious processing strategies.

Summarization appears to enhance cognition or understanding of text. Rosenshine (1997) states that research in the area of cognitive processing (how information is stored and retrieved) suggests that the quality of information storage is stronger if students summarize and compare the material in a passage rather than simply reading it. He goes on to assert that summarizing material improves the quality of student understanding and internalization of material. Friend (2000-2001) similarly concludes that summarization reinforces connections among ideas that students must learn and creates connections between new ideas and prior knowledge. She believes effective instruction in summarization helps students learn better and improve their grades.

It seems, therefore, that by organizing and reducing the number of ideas to be remembered, students who write summaries strengthen their comprehension. Such active interaction with the text helps students to remember it. Summarization is a really good way to force students to engage actively with reading material. Quite simply, short of cheating, there is no way to write a good summary if one has not read intelligently the material to be used.

Since summarization has been linked to cognitive development, it may act as a useful developmental strategy. Hidi and Anderson (1998) have summarized the research in this area. It

indicates that adults summarize differently from children. Adults tend to present ideas thematically, are better able to isolate ideas, take more liberties with the order in which ideas are presented, and feel freer to rearrange material. Children, on the other hand, are more motivated by personal considerations, choosing information that is of personal interest rather than what is of importance to the writer's purpose. They also present information in the order in which it appears in the original. Teaching developmental students to use the strategies typical of more competent, mature summarizers may help them to perform at a higher developmental level.

Furthermore, successful instruction in summarization may actually improve both comprehension and student discipline. Jitendra et al. (2000) studied the effects of summarization instruction on students with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders. They found that those who successfully learnt how to identify main ideas and experienced improved comprehension of text, also exhibited a decline in behavioral difficulties. Rosenshine's research supports these findings. Students with disabilities who were taught question generation (creating questions about what they read) and summarization obtained higher post-test scores than those who were not (1997). It appears, then, that there is a strong correlation between comprehension and appropriate classroom behavior.

Training in the techniques of summarization also develops strategic or meta-cognitive behavior. In recent years, much research has been done that indicates the benefits of meta-cognitive strategies. Students who have a repertoire of such skills outperform those who do not on a number of learning tasks. Various strategic behaviors--decoding, knowledge of text features, previewing of material by skimming text, examining title or subheadings, setting a purpose, self-questioning--are practised by students engaged in the task of summarization (Barr et al, 1991). Summarizing involves planning, an advanced cognitive operation, and other meta-cognitive processes. Having to select and reduce information, monitor understanding, and draw on prior knowledge, are activities meta-cognitive in nature. Thus, summarization can help students develop skills that have a demonstrable impact on learning.

Closely related to this is the value of summarization as a study aid. Knudson (1998) asserts that summary writing helps students organize and remember main points and macrostructure of text. This implies that summarization is a potentially useful skill, not only for work in English classes, but also for study skills and comprehension across the curriculum. Training in summary writing inside the classroom is something students can use outside it for their own purposes. Garner, for instance, noted that proficient summarizers process and store information efficiently. They generate topic-sentence-type statements that are then available for later retrieval (1982). Summarization serves as a kind of mnemonic device, synthesizing and compressing information such that it is easier to recall. Major points are extracted which can be reviewed and studied for tests. Summarization can be used as a way of evaluating how well one has comprehended and retained particular segments of text.

Summarization reinforces other language skills, since it depends on both comprehension and writing. Summarizing a text is fundamental to more sophisticated composition and some of the skills utilized can be extended to most other kinds of writing (Hayes, 1989). Research done by Knudson (1998) led her to conclude that instruction in writing summaries was very effective in improving the writing of college-bound students. As they identified the writer's main points,

position or primary support, such students incorporated the passage into their own prior knowledge. Hence, when they subsequently wrote responses to a passage previously summarized, they were able to take a position on the article and support it appropriately. By summarizing before they responded, students were able to write much better responses. In summarizing text, students have to draw on existing vocabulary or learn new words as they seek to supply super-ordinate or generic terms for longer, more detailed phrases or concepts. They supply synonyms and identify key words. They learn to edit as they delete less important ideas or illustrative detail. Reading is enhanced as they attempt to identify main ideas. Indeed, full understanding of a passage demands sensitivity to what is more or less important and requires an appreciation of the relative importance of various parts (Winograd, 1984).

One higher-order skill—location of the topic sentence—deserves special consideration. Selection of the topic sentence is difficult, and creation of such sentences is a problem even at college level as it requires the use of complex cognitive strategies such as backtracking, reviewing and manipulating large portions of text (Hidi & Anderson, 1986). However, the ability to locate and, where necessary, invent topic sentences, is an important skill in much of the work done by college students. The practice gained in the process of writing summaries may therefore prove extremely beneficial to such students.

Summarization has a role to play, too, in enhancing critical thinking. Casazza (1993) asserts that in writing summaries, students are practising critical thinking, often for the first time. She argues that in teaching summarization, one can show students that it is their responsibility to bring meaning to the text and that eventually, students should function independently in this process. Jitendra et al. (2000) support this contention when they conclude that summarization instruction improved students' ability to make inferences and read critically.

Independent critical thought is utilized as students make decisions about what to include or omit, as they create, arrange, and reconstruct information; and as they fill in gaps where the author was not explicit, in order to construct a piece of writing that has meaning and coherence. The task also requires sensitivity to text structure and the use of different approaches according to the type of text being summarized. It requires students to reprocess text—to use their own words, shift ideas to different positions. Hence, it is a useful transformational activity that helps students to internalize usage by changing the forms of sentences and inventing new structures and relationships between words and concepts. This necessity to invent, choose, and make decisions requires students to use critical thinking skills.

Summaries are used in an endless variety of ways in the modern world as one way of coping with the tremendous explosion of knowledge currently being experienced. It has been shown that numerous types of summaries exist and attempts have been made to classify these and to indicate their historical and future importance (Ratteray, 1985). Summaries are important in government, in business, in academia, in international trade and in the professions. In fact, their production has become big business, as is attested to by the success of Reader's Digest and other companies that create abstracts or summaries of business news and other information for a broad spectrum of users. Anyone doing an Internet search or scrolling through a satellite TV menu trying to decide which site to explore further or which programme to watch, can appreciate

the usefulness of accurate summaries. In short, summaries are a crucial aspect of information management, and as such, are practically indispensable in the modern world.

If schools are to fulfill their mandate to facilitate the achievement of high academic standards, and to prepare students to contribute to national development by becoming critical, analytical thinkers and consumers, it is evident that instruction in summary writing must be, or continue to be an integral part of instruction across the curriculum.

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