



Summarize to Get the Gist

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The 10 percent summary strategy costs little in teacher time, and it prepares students for the common core state standards in literacy.



June 2012

As schools prepare for the common core state standards in literacy, they'll be confronted with two challenges: first, helping students comprehend complex texts, and, second, training students to write arguments supported by factual evidence. A teacher's response to these challenges might be to lead class discussions about complex reading or assign regular in-class argument essays. Yet the reality is that after discussing a difficult article with a class of 20 or more students, even the most engaging teacher cannot guarantee that every student will understand it. Meanwhile, one would be hard-pressed to find an English teacher who has not inwardly cringed at the thought of having to routinely grade stacks of in-class essays. Some teachers may even neglect to assign such essays, wanting to avoid the work that follows.

I would argue that frequent written summaries of complex texts are a great way to develop students' reading comprehension and argument-writing skills, while minimizing the time the teacher spends correcting. Let's look at the benefits of this strategy as well as how the process works.

The Plusses of Summary Writing

It Requires Active Reading

If a teacher asks students to not only read but also summarize an article, the students will have to give that article more than a cursory glance. Summary writing hinges on the student's ability to parse main ideas from supporting details and paraphrase those main ideas—two essential skills for reading comprehension and argument writing.

It Builds Background Knowledge

No longer will students be able to rely on personal experience alone to support their positions. The common core state standards explicitly state that students will be required to write "arguments focused on discipline-specific content." When students routinely summarize content-rich texts, they absorb content that they can subsequently use as evidence in their written arguments.

For example, take Charles C. Mann's *Before Columbus: The Americas of 1491* (Atheneum Books, 2009), a nonfiction text recommended by the common core for grades 9–10. When students read a section about the importance of maize, having them write a summary of the

section will help them attend to the author's point: The development of maize was a great achievement. Later, if called on to write an argument about notable global achievements, the students will most likely recall this point about maize because of the effort they expended in producing their summaries.

It Shows Students How to Craft an Argument

Students need to know how to read arguments before they can learn how to write them. Summarizing well-written arguments familiarizes students with rhetorical strategies—such as problem and solution, claim and counterclaim, and reference to authority rather than personal opinion—that are common to persuasive essays. Further, if students routinely summarize articles in a variety of subjects, they'll learn how to construct arguments in each discipline. For example, arguments in science are often based on controlled experiments, whereas arguments in the humanities are often based on expert opinion and appeal to authority.

It's Easy to Grade

Because a summary is shorter and requires less analysis than a fully developed essay, the assignment is faster and simpler to grade, especially with the *focus-correcting strategy* I describe below.

For all these reasons, summary writing is an essential building block for both reading comprehension and argument writing. Moreover, three meta-analytical studies (Graham & Hebert, 2010; Graham & Perin, 2007; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) all single out summary writing as an effective instructional strategy.

What a Good Summary Entails

Ask 20 teachers how they'd define or assign a summary, and you'll hear 20 different approaches. Summaries can take many forms, from graphic organizers to two-column notes. Teachers who want to experiment with different kinds of summaries might refer to Rick Wormeli's book, *Summarizing in Any Subject* (ASCD, 2005) or Emily Kissner's *Summarizing, Paraphrasing, and Retelling* (Heinemann, 2006) for more ideas.

The 10 Percent Summary

My personal recommendation is a model I call *the 10 percent summary*, which requires students to write in complete sentences and in paragraph form. Unlike a summary presented in a graphic organizer, this approach pushes students to improve their writing and research skills. For example, students must cite their sources in the proper form; decide which lines (if any) from the article to quote; know how to use relevant vocabulary words in context; and correctly use specific writing conventions—such as proper use of the comma with quotes or an ellipsis.

The 10 percent summary should

- Be approximately 10 percent of the length of the original article.
- Summarize content-related nonfiction articles that are from 700 to 3,000 words long, the typical length of most magazine or newspaper articles.
- Begin with a sentence that includes the title of the article, the source, the author or authors, and a summary of the topic, all correctly punctuated. I use the acronym "T"SAT (article title, source, author, and topic) as a reminder to students. (The quotes around the T and the underlining of the S indicate to students to put the title of the article in quotes and underline the source.)
- Include the main ideas in the order the article presents them, without introducing

personal opinion.

- Be written in the summarizer's own words but may include a few short quotes, especially if these contain original expressions that convey the tone of the article.

Although the 10 percent summary could never be construed as creative, it does give students practice putting complex ideas into their own words, creating transitions between ideas, and expressing these ideas succinctly.

How to Evaluate a Summary

To evaluate a 10 percent summary, I recommend a technique called *focus correcting*, in which a teacher selects three areas and only grades those areas. The teacher assigns points to each element—such as the opening topic sentence, the main ideas, and correctly used vocabulary words; the student then lists each element with its corresponding points at the top of his or her paper (see "[Sample 10 Percent Summary](#)"). This technique benefits everyone: Students know up front how the teacher will evaluate their writing and will typically try harder to master these skills, and the teacher doesn't need to correct every single error on every student's summary.

For example, a teacher might assign 20 points to the topic sentence ("T"SAT); 60 points to the three or four main ideas written in the student's own words; and 20 points to four vocabulary words that the student has used correctly and highlighted in a box. Or the teacher might assign 20 points to the topic sentence, 50 points to the three or four main ideas, and 30 points to two well-selected and correctly punctuated quotations from the text.

I can quickly assess the topic sentence, the summary of main ideas, and the usage of the boxed vocabulary words. I don't comment on all the errors, and although I might wish to give extensive feedback on the summary, time doesn't permit it.

A note of caution regarding focus correcting: If I receive a paper that meets the standards set by the focus correction areas but has egregious errors (terrible spelling, sloppy presentation, basic capitalization mistakes, and so on), I'll send it back as an incomplete with a time limit for the student to redo it.¹

In Summary ...

Assigning a 10-point summary gives me an opportunity to determine whether students can understand and put into their own words the main ideas of a complex, content-related article. It also enables me to reinforce basic documentation rules, domain-specific vocabulary, and writing conventions—and do it all quickly and reliably. It may not be the perfect writing assignment, but when I'm trying to teach 100-plus students how to be better readers and writers, I think it comes pretty close.

Sample 10 Percent Summary

Here's a sample 10 percent summary (98 words) of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's [*Declaration of Sentiments*](#) (969 words). Written in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, in support of women's rights, the declaration is included in the Common Core State Standards Appendix B as an exemplar of informational text in history/social studies at the 11th and higher grade levels.

Title: Women's Movement

In the Declaration of Sentiments from *An American Primer*, the members of the Seneca Falls Conference created a document that lists 15 women's grievances in 1848. Modelled after the *Declaration of Independence* and keeping much of the original language, the declaration gives examples of "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations" including unfair divorce, marriage, and property laws with no franchise to change them. Women, the document asserts, are denied career and educational opportunities and must live under a different code of morals. The declaration concludes with the demand for immediate change, granting women the rights of men.

Summary Score

Total possible points/points earned:

"T" <u>S</u> AT (title, source, author, topic)	20/16
2–4 main ideas	60/60
5 boxed vocabulary words	<u>20/16</u>
	100/92

The student lost four points for not putting quotation marks around the title and four points for not using a fifth key vocabulary word in context from the original document. Note that the student was not penalized for mistakes outside the focus correction areas, such as the misspelling of the word *modeled* in the second sentence.

Endnote

¹ For more on focus correcting, see *The Collins Writing Program: Improving Student Performance Through Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum* (Collins Education Associates, 2007).

References

- Graham, S., & Hebert, M. (2010). *Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading*. New York: Alliance for Excellent Education.
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- Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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