

Summary Writing as a Critical School Improvement Strategy

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With all the strategies available to improve schools, why emphasize summary writing? Quite simply, our students need to read more to expand their subject-specific background knowledge and their academic vocabularies. The best way to encourage the careful reading of nonfiction texts that will add content *and* vocabulary knowledge is to ask students to summarize, *in writing*, what they have read.

Why the Emphasis on Summary Writing

Marilyn Jager Adams describes the decline of reading skills, especially in the upper grades, in her extensively researched article “Advancing Our Students’ Language and Literacy” in the *American Educator*. Jager Adams carefully reviews the literacy achievement data from 1960 through 2010 and concludes, “The literacy level of our secondary students is languishing because the kids are not reading what they need to be reading” (p.3). This is primarily because school textbooks have become easier to read over the last 50 years while newspapers and other texts have not or, in the case of scientific magazines, “had increased dramatically [in reading difficulty] from 1930 to 1990” (p.5). For example, American textbooks’ sentence length has decreased from an average of 20 words in 1962 to 14 today.

In light of this information, one might conclude that teachers can lecture about content to help close the information and complexity gap, but then we are faced with another difficult fact: “The richness and complexity of the words used in oral language samples paled in comparison with written texts” (p.5). Students need the experience of reading complex texts because written language is more difficult: The words are more precise, the concepts are more elaborated, and syntax is more complex.

Reading complex, subject-related text helps students begin to overcome what has been popularly called the “Matthew effect,” which describes why good readers become better and poor readers become poorer as each year goes by. Our non-reading students are constantly falling behind because their store of background knowledge and academic vocabulary is not growing. Once students get beyond basic decoding, we need to help them expand what E. D. Hirsch (2003) calls students “word and world knowledge” (p. 21), which brings us back to summary writing.

Writing summaries comes in as the second-most impactful strategy to improve student achievement, according to the meta-analysis by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001), topped only by identifying similarities and differences. And I would argue that identifying similarities and differences is impossible without the knowledge gained by reading. In another exhaustive meta-analytical study, Graham and Perin (2007) examined the research to determine the most effective strategies to improve writing skills.

After explicitly teaching writing skills (e.g., brainstorming, editing), summarization has the most powerful, positive impact (p. 16).

John Hattie's (2009) highly respected *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* categorizes 800 research studies into different groups, such as contributions from home, contributions from school, and contributions from the curricula. Under findings about teaching approaches, Hattie writes:

The highest ranked strategy, that of organizing and transforming, has also been found to be a valuable component of many interventions (Hattie *et al.*, 1996). It is likely that the types of strategies included in this category (such as summarizing and paraphrasing) promote a more *active* approach to learning tasks (p. 191).

The focus here is on two benefits: the cognitive benefit that organizing and transforming information provides and the engagement it requires. Students must actively engage when creating a written summary.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) arose as a result of the growing evidence that our students are not able to comprehend texts that are necessary for success in careers or college. The Common Core has created 10 Anchor Standards for reading. The second standard states that students need to “determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas” (CCSS, 2010, p.10). With the possible exception of narrative writing, the Anchor Standards for writing all depend upon the students' ability to understand a text before they analyze it or use evidence from text to support their own ideas.

After a careful analysis of the CCSS, a group dedicated to helping schools meet the standards, Achieve the Core, determined that schools need to make three shifts in their practice. Schools must encourage students to:

- Build knowledge through content-rich nonfiction
- Read, write, and speak grounded in evidence from text
- Regularly practice with complex text and its academic language

What I propose here—frequent summary writing of content-related nonfiction articles—will meet the requirements set by these three shifts. The next section describes exactly what the proposed summaries should look like and how we can teach students to write them.

Why the Ten Percent Summary

The previous section made the case for summary writing in general. This section will argue for a specialized form of summary writing, the Ten Percent Summary, that meets the following five characteristics:

- They are approximately 10 percent of the length of the original text.
- They summarize *content-related* nonfiction text that is 700–3,000 words long, the typical length of most magazine or newspaper articles (articles and texts shorter than 700 words are hard to summarize using the Ten Percent formula, and they do not build the reading stamina that students need).
- They begin with a sentence that includes the source of the text, the title, the authors, a verb that describes the author’s purpose (e.g., *describes, argues, explains*), and a statement of the topic, all correctly punctuated. I use the acronym S “T” A r t (source, title, author, right verb, and topic) as a reminder to students. The underlining of the *S* and the quotation marks around the *T* tell students to underline the source and put the title of the article in quotes. The uppercase *S*, *T*, and *A* indicate that the source, title, and authors should have initial capitalization.
- They include the main ideas in the order the text presents them, without introducing personal opinion.
- They are 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.

The advantages of the Ten Percent Summary are many. Here are seven:

1. **Can be used in all subjects.** One of the major advantages of the Ten Percent Summary is that it provides a consistent approach for all teachers at all grade levels in all subjects. Since our goal is school improvement, not individual teacher improvement, we should have an approach all teachers can use. However, if you were to poll 20 teachers and ask them to define summary writing, you would hear 20 different approaches. Following one structure, school-wide, helps teachers and students know what to expect. The Ten Percent Summary is easy to remember, easy to implement, and easy to grade in all subjects, not just English language arts (ELA) or reading classes. Once taught, it’s an easy-to-implement assignment in all subjects, not just English language arts (ELA) or reading classes.
2. **Improves reading skills.** In the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (2016), the guide’s panel makes three key recommendations supported by an extensive review of research literature. The second recommendation is to:

Integrate writing and reading to emphasize key writing features. Combining reading and writing together in an activity or assignment helps students learn about important text features. For example, asking students to summarize a text they just read signals that well-written texts have a set of main points, that students should understand main points while they read, and that when students write certain types of compositions they should focus on main points. Reading exemplar texts familiarizes students with important features of writing, which they can then emulate (p. 31).

In *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2011), John Bean states:

A powerful way to promote reading skills is to ask students to write a summary of an assigned article. An assigned summary can be as short as one sentence or as long as a page; the typical length is 150–250 words. Summary writing requires that the reader separate main ideas from supporting details, thereby providing practice at finding the hierarchical structure of an article. Moreover, it requires that readers suspend their own egocentrism, leaving out their own ideas in order to listen carefully to the author (p. 178).

3. **Builds writing skills.** There are a great many ways to teach summarization, and summaries can take many forms, such as two-column notes, web graphic organizers, and wheel-and-spoke graphic organizers. But what I am advocating here is a consistently formatted summary that requires students to write in sentence and paragraph form. While this type of writing will never be construed as creative nor does it help develop an original voice, it does give students practice putting ideas into their own words, creating transitions between those ideas, and expressing these ideas succinctly. Additionally, if you add one or more writing conventions as criteria, students can practice those conventions without the burden of having to create their own content.
4. **Provides reasonable test prep.** Most educators hate teaching to the test, but the ACT, SAT, and most middle- and high school state tests have reading sections of about 550 to 1,500 words with either multiple-choice or open-response questions that require students to identify—you guessed it—the central idea. Students who have read 50, 100, or 150 articles before taking these high-stakes tests have four advantages: a lot of background knowledge, a lot of practice reading nonfiction, a lot of practice finding main ideas, and a lot of exposure to academic vocabulary.

In “How and How Not to Prepare Students for the New Tests,” Timothy Shanahan forcefully argues against traditional test prep strategies, such as using data analysis to determine the types of questions students fail at, having students practice certain kinds of questions, and having students take practice tests, because research indicates “standardized comprehension tests do not measure multiple skills; they measure a single one: reading comprehension” (p. 185). As an alternative to isolated skills practice, he recommends the following five strategies (p. 187–188):

- Have students read extensively within instruction. These tests [PARCC and Smarter Balanced] measure reading ability, and you are not likely to develop reading ability without letting students read.
- Have students read increasing amounts of text without guidance or support. Performing on a test is like delivering a monologue, not like participating in a conversation.
- Make sure the texts are rich in content and sufficiently challenging. Lots of reading of easy text will not adequately prepare students for dealing with difficult text.
- Have students explain their answers and provide text evidence supporting their claims.

- Engage students in writing about text, not just in replying to multiple-choice questions.

As you can imagine, I love Shanahan's last recommendation: write about the text. He supports this practice:

Research shows that writing about text enhances reading comprehension. Graham and Hebert (2010) ... found that writing about text was a more powerful stimulant to learning than reading alone, reading and rereading, reading and discussing, or reading and studying. Although writing text summaries and syntheses may not look like the tests students are being prepared for, this kind of activity should provide the most powerful and productive kind of preparation (p. 188).

5. **Provides an opportunity to use technical or academic vocabulary in context.** In *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21 Century*, Steven Pinker focuses on word choice:

A summary should repeat enough of the key words to allow the reader to connect it back to the earlier passages that spelled out the points in detail. But those words should be fitted into new sentences that work together as a coherent passage of prose (p. 40).

In the "Is easy to evaluate" section below, I recommend focusing on a few criteria, one of which is using academic vocabulary from the text in the summary. Before distributing a text to summarize, select and circle four to eight content or general academic vocabulary words that you feel are critical. Review these words with students and require that they use a certain number of the words in the summary. In the Collins Writing Program this requirement would become a focus correction area (FCA), such as "Correctly use four of the seven vocabulary words. Circle and number the words so I can find them and give you credit for your work."

6. **Develops research skills.** For a student to be able to write an effective research paper, they must be able to attribute sources, summarize, and paraphrase. This assignment provides practice in all these skills.
7. **Is easy to evaluate.** If Ten Percent Summary writing is to be one of the key areas of school improvement and every teacher in every subject assigns one summary per month from articles or texts averaging 1,000 words, a typical student in grades 6–12 who has five subjects would do 45 summaries a year. That typical student will have read 45,000 nonfiction, content-related words and written 4,500 words in sentence and paragraph format with proper research citations, the quality and quantity of which would make students career and college ready. The down side is that teachers will have to evaluate all their work. A teacher with 120 students writing one summary per month will have to evaluate 1,080 summaries a year; the evaluation system *must* be efficient and easy to use for the teacher to be successful.

The evaluation system I recommend is called focus correcting. When using this system, a teacher selects three areas and *only grades those areas*. The teacher assigns points to each

area—such as the S “T” A r t topic sentence, three to four central ideas in their own words, and correctly used vocabulary words—and the student lists each focus area with its corresponding points at the top of the paper. This technique benefits everyone: Students know up front how the teacher will evaluate their writing and will typically try harder to master these areas. And the teacher doesn’t need to correct every single error on every student’s summary.

For example, I might assign 20 points to the topic sentence (S “T” A r t); 60 points to the three to four central ideas written in the student’s own words; and 20 points to four vocabulary words that are used correctly and circled. Or I might assign 20 points to the topic sentence, 50 points to the three to four main ideas, and 30 points to two well-selected and correctly punctuated quotations from the text. I can *quickly* assess all these areas. Although I might wish to give extensive feedback on the summary, time doesn’t permit it, so I do not comment on all the errors.

With this system, the first few papers usually require more time to establish a focus and pace; thereafter, I can evaluate each paper in less than a minute. One time-saving practice I use is to grade a few volunteers’ papers during each class using a document camera. If students volunteer, I grade their papers using focus correcting with the promise that they can redo the paper for a higher grade when they see my evaluation. By the time I have done a number of these volunteer papers, I have found my “grading groove” and students have seen the process. As the year goes by and if other teachers are using the same system, the grading is valid and reliable and no one teacher is overworked with too many papers to grade. Of course the hope is with this amount of practice, the students will become efficient and accurate summary writers, and as we know, it is a lot quicker grading papers with 100s than with lower grades.

In conclusion, to increase students’ knowledge, reading comprehension, and writing skills, require frequent Ten Percent Summaries. Research supports this strategy, high-stakes tests often measure these skills, and career and college writing tasks take it for granted.

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