

“What’s the Gist?” Summary Writing for Struggling Adolescent Writers

The ability to write a tight, concise, accurate summary of information is an essential entry point to other writing genres, especially analytical and technical writing. The purpose of a summary, after all, is to convey correct information in an efficient manner so that the reader can learn the main idea and essential details through a piece that is much shorter than the original. It must also contain the necessary references so the reader can locate it. The summary is *not* meant to replace the original document.

As writing teachers of struggling readers and writers, we knew our students had difficulty with restating information in an organized and accurate way. When prompted to summarize a reading, many of our students focused on minor details, interjected their own opinions and experiences, or simply recopied entire sentences from the text. We recognized that this inability to convey precise information impeded their writing in other classes as well, especially in developing research papers and essays in their content classes.

How Is Summary Writing Used?

Teachers assign summary writing for a number of purposes. Perhaps the most common is for condensing information learned through assigned readings. This type of writing has been recommended as a method for clarifying learning in science (Friend, 2002), as a tool for developing first- and second-language skills in foreign language

classes (Rivard, 2001), and as a means for developing vocabulary and critical thinking skills (Bromley & McKeveny, 1986). Summary writing is widely used in secondary and college classrooms where it is seen as both a means for assessing student learning as well as a way to increase understanding of complex topics. In their study of the use of summary writing in a college psychology course, Radmacher and Latosi-Sawin (1995) found that those who wrote summaries scored 8% higher on the final.

Like many other writing genres, it is worthwhile to utilize direct instruction of summary writing for struggling writers (Hare & Borchardt, 1984). Like other types of writing, improvement in summary writing is particularly resistant to a trial-and-error approach—a position that resonates in Fearn’s admonition that “practice doesn’t make perfect—practice makes permanent” (personal communication, August 1, 2001). As well, Hill (1991) reminds us that summary writing is more complex than it may first appear, but that when explicitly taught, these writers make progress. This type of writing can be especially difficult for students with learning disabilities (Scott & Windsor, 2000) because a student with reading comprehension difficulties is hard pressed to identify important points. Similarly, English language learners struggle with summary writing because the level of academic language necessary significantly increases the cognitive load of the task.

Why Teach Summary Writing?

Perhaps because it lacks the creative spark of poetry writing or the personal connections of autobiographical incidents, summary writing may be

overlooked in many middle school classrooms. After all, the restatement of the main points of a longer text may be viewed by teachers and students alike as an academic exercise (and a particularly boring one at that) with few benefits beyond accountability for reading assignments. However, the ability to summarize text accurately and efficiently without plagiarizing is a core competency for other writing genres. For instance, research papers are required to have a review of the literature on the topic. A well-crafted persuasive essay

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must contain factual information that forwards the writer's position. And certainly an analytic piece of writing must necessarily describe the person, event, process, or phenomenon being analyzed before moving to the critical position assumed by the student writer. Success in each of these writing genres is predicated on the

accuracy of the information cited by the writer to support the thesis.

Types of Summary Writing

There are two types of summaries used by student writers, and each has its unique purposes. The first is the *précis*, a brief summary of another text that contains the main points but little embellishment. It is usually six to eight sentences in length, although a short reading may reduce the number of necessary sentences to four.

A second type is the evaluation summary. Like the *précis*, it is brief and focuses on the thesis of the reading. Unlike the *précis*, it concludes with a statement of the student writer's opinions and insights. The most common kind of evaluation summary is the traditional book report containing both a summary of the book as well as recommendations and criticisms.

All summaries possess three common characteristics:

- they are shorter than the original piece;
- they paraphrase the author's words; and
- they focus on the main ideas only.

Although we addressed both forms of summaries over the course of the year, this article describes our *précis* writing unit. We began the semester with *précis* writing as one of five Short Cues used nearly every day with the class (Fearn & Farnan, 2001). In their book, the authors describe these practices (*précis*, Power Writing, process pieces, word limiters, and directions) as "writing prompts that promote whole pieces of writing in short space and time" (p. 67). They argue that the ability to "write short" means that students must write precisely, choosing their words carefully to convey the central themes without compromising the integrity of the original work.

This approach of "writing short" fits well with our student needs. The 32 adolescents in our class attend an urban public school where 74% of the student body has a home language other than English and 100% qualify for free or reduced lunch. Half of our students were classified as ESL students and four had Individual Education Plans (IEP) that identified them as having a disability. At the beginning of the semester, the class averaged 96 words on a 5-minute timed writing sample and used 12.89 words per sentence. This added up to a group of students with little stamina for sustained writing. We knew we would have to start small.

GIST Summary Writing

We were cautious in our approach to summary writing. We knew that it was not sufficient to simply "cause" writing through writing prompts alone. Although we are not in favor of formula writing (there are too many "hamburger paragraphs" in the world already), we knew that our students would benefit from a systematic method of *précis* writing. We were also cognizant of the research of Stein and Kirby (1992) who recommend that the text be available when teaching students who are not yet facile at writing summaries rather than

using recall methods alone to create a précis.

One technique that appealed to us was Generating Interaction between Schemata and Text (GIST), a collaborative learning strategy used to increase comprehension of expository texts (Cunningham, 1982; Herrell, 2000). The text is divided into sections that serve as stopping points for clarification and writing. At each stop point, the meaning of the passage is discussed, vocabulary is explained, and a single summary sentence is negotiated. The cycle is repeated until the entire text has been read. The list of sentences generated by the students serves as a précis for the longer text. A list of the steps for introducing GIST appears in Table 1.

Survivor Writing

Although we had identified a method for instructing students on précis writing, we still needed to find engaging texts. Because our class was a writing class, we were not bound to one content area for our reading materials. Instead, we opted to intersperse many nontraditional texts to motivate students. We quickly settled on a "Survivor" theme to parlay the ready-made interest of the ubiquitous game show into a conduit for in-class writing

instruction. We opened the unit with two readings on Phineas Gage, the man who survived a horrific railroad accident in 1848 that blew an iron tamping rod through his skull. While his physical wounds healed, the terrible injury changed his personality profoundly, paving the way for the brand-new study of the brain as the source of personality. A complete list of the readings used in this unit can be found in Figure 1.

The reading was photocopied so that students could follow along and underline key words and phrases while we displayed it on the overhead. Stop points were identified and marked on the text in advance. After each section of the passage was read, we stopped to discuss the content and unfamiliar vocabulary. We then used a think-aloud strategy (Davey, 1983) to model the selection and elimination of various facts for use in our one summary sentence. We charted these ideas on the board, then experimented with different wordings until we could combine the important ideas into one sentence. This sentence was written on a sentence strip and displayed in a pocket chart. This instruction cycle was repeated until the entire passage had been read. The final step was to reread the list of sentences to check for understanding. At

Table 1. Sequence of Steps for Direct Instruction of GIST

| | |
|----|---|
| 1. | Distribute copies of a short text (1–1½ pages). Each text should be divided into four or five sections that represent logical summarizing points, indicated by a line and the word "STOP" in the margins. |
| 2. | Explain GIST: students read a portion of a text, stop, and write a sentence that summarizes the "gist" of the passage. At the end of the text, students will have written four or five sentences, or a concise summary of the text. |
| 3. | Introduce the text to be read, build prior knowledge, and discuss key vocabulary. Read aloud the first passage of the text while students read along silently. |
| 4. | Lead class discussion about important facts from the passage, writing their ideas on the board. |
| 5. | Lead class discussion about how to formulate ideas into a sentence, allowing students to share ideas and negotiate these ideas to craft an accurate and precise sentence. |
| 6. | Write the agreed-upon sentence on the board, numbering it #1. Students write the sentence in their journals. |
| 7. | Read aloud the second passage, following same sequence above, and numbering the agreed-upon sentence #2. Repeat cycle until text is finished. |
| 8. | Discuss how the class has condensed a page of text into a limited number of sentences. Reread the series of sentences to check for meaning. Make any changes necessary so that it serves as a concise written summary. |

this time, we edited any sentences that could benefit from the use of transitions to make the paragraph flow more smoothly. Students were surprised to see how easily a précis could be constructed using this method.

During subsequent lessons, we paid close attention to sentence combining and the use of dependent clauses. The avalanche readings were especially useful for this because we introduced a newspaper story of a recent accident. This text structure was different from the ones we had previously read about Phineas Gage because it used the inverted pyramid structure common to the journalistic trade (Ryan, 1995). We first taught this text structure, and then showed how we divided the text so that the bulk of the summary sentences would be generated in the first half of the article. As we read and created a list of ideas for use in

summary sentences, we attended to the use of complex sentences with dependent clauses (and their accompanying commas) as a way of packing sentences with more than one idea.

Our next step was to create opportunities to write a précis more independently. Capitalizing on the survivor theme, we showed a 10-minute segment from the PBS broadcast "Avalanche!" (see McDonald, Figure 1). This video clip featured footage and interviews with extreme skiers who braved treacherous slopes for sport. The presence of these skiers sometimes triggers an avalanche, which was ably explained through visual diagrams and dramatic footage. We stopped the video three times at logical points and asked students to write one summary sentence in their writer's notebook. Frederico's précis of the video segment (with errors intact; all student names are pseudonyms) read:

~~Weak layers of snow~~ Heavy layers of snow pile ~~one~~ ~~the weak ones~~ up on the weak layers near the bottom, causing it to slide and begin an avalanche. Most avalanches are triggered by humans, due to ignorance or arrogance. Many times these people take risks because they're so pumped up that they don't pay attention to the warnings.

As his teachers, we were particularly heartened to see the words and phrases he crossed out in an effort to create complex sentences that would convey more information. A review of the previous 15 pages of his notebook before this writing showed that he had never before engaged in self-editing in this class.

After practicing the précis short cues for several weeks, we were ready to move into collaborative groups where students could negotiate sentences with one another. We selected readings from *The Worst-case Scenario Survival Handbook* (see Piven & Borgenicht in Figure 1) because of their connection to our theme and because they offered yet another teaching point we needed to address. We had seen a bit of plagiarism in some of the précis writing we were getting from the students and realized that we had not taught them how to avoid it. These readings gave us the opportunity to address the issue directly through discussion of

Texts for Getting Started

- Fleischman, J. (2002). *Phineas Gage: A gruesome but true story about brain science*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- McDonald, J. (Writer), Hoppe, B. (Writer & Director). (1997). *Avalanche!* [Television series episode]. In B. Hoppe (Producer), *Nova*. New York and Washington, DC: Public Broadcasting Service.
- National Snow and Ice Data Center. (n.d.). *Avalanche! Surviving an avalanche*. Retrieved February 8, 2003, from <http://nsidc.org/snow/avalanche/#WHY>
- Seven skiers dead in second deadly B.C. avalanche in a month. (February 1, 2003). Retrieved February 8, 2003 from <http://www.csas.org/Incidents/2002-03/20030201-Canada.html#OFFICIAL>
- Shreeve, J. (1995). What happened to Phineas? Retrieved November 12, 2002 from <http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/~reffland/anthropology/origins/phineas.html>

Texts for Collaborative Writing

- Piven, B., & Borgenicht, D. (1999). *The worst-case scenario survival handbook*. San Francisco: Chronicle.
- How to escape from quicksand (pp. 18–19)
 - How to escape from a mountain lion (pp. 54–56)
 - How to wrestle free from an alligator (pp. 57–59)
 - How to survive if your parachute fails to open (pp. 137–139)

Texts for Assessment

- Stafford, M. (2003, January 29). Teen ejected in wreck saved by utility wires. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, p. A4.

Figure 1. Survival Texts for Summary-Writing Lessons

the format of the text. All of these readings are constructed as lists, complete with numbered steps. The overall number of words is reduced in this format, making it even easier to use the authors’ words because there are so few to choose from. We shared a general rule with our class—no more than four words in a row can be taken directly from the text. Although this was a somewhat arbitrary figure, we hoped that it would encourage them to pay attention at the word level.

We divided the class into four heterogeneous groups so that each had at least one strong writer and one weaker writer. The texts, complete with stop points, were distributed, and we sat in on discussions. A scribe for the group was responsible for recording the agreed sentences.

Frederico’s group wrote about what to do if your parachute failed to open:

When your parachute won’t open, signal another jumper to come ~~towards~~ toward you and when they do hook arms. Because you will be traveling at about 130 miles an hour, you will ~~not be able to grab on normally and will~~ have to hold on to the straps of the other jumper and when it opens there may be a chance you’ll brake your arms. To have a safe landing, try to land on water (if any) and if their isn’t ~~any~~ watch out for power lines. Now modern chutes are made to open even if you make a mistake, but the reserve chute must be packed correctly.

Marco’s group wrote about what to do if you are about to be attacked by a cougar:

When you meet a cougar do not run or crouch, and use things to make yourself bigger. If you are with a child pick them up so you can look bigger and back up slowly, or wait until it leaves. If it acts like it’s going to attack, throw rocks. Fight back if you are attacked and hit him in his head using rocks and sticks.

Julia’s group had the task of explaining what measures to take if you ever need to wrestle an alligator. They wrote:

Cover his eyes or his nose—~~these~~ that’s were he’s weak. If it gets you in his jaws [inserted] ~~punch~~ punch him in the nose and don’t let him shake you. Because alligators have a lot of germs in there mouth, go get to a doctor immediately. To avoid an attack, don’t feed them and don’t mess with the babies and don’t try to touch them.

Not surprisingly, the writing activity created quite a bit of conversation. After each group had written their survivor advice, they taught the rest of the class what to do if they found themselves in the same unfortunate circumstances. This presentation of information also allowed their classmates to ask clarifying questions about summaries that were not written clearly or contained too little information to be useful. In some cases, sentences were re-written to reflect the feedback of their peers.

At this point, we felt like it was time to assess their understanding of summary writing. In keeping with our survivor theme, we chose one of the most extraordinary stories we had come across.

Assessing Summary Writing

The piece we chose for the assessment offered many of the elements we had taught in the unit. First, it was a newspaper article that offered the inverted pyramid text structure we had seen before. Second, it had a photograph to accompany the story, like many of the pieces we had previously written about. It was of a similar length to the other stories we had read and discussed, and of course it recounted a survivor’s tale. Entitled “Teen ejected in wreck saved by utility wires” (see Stafford in Figure 1), the story described the fortunes of Joe Thompson III of Kansas City, Missouri, who was catapulted into the overhead wires after a traffic accident.

Students were required to write a summary of the article, but were not mandated to use the GIST frame to create one. In order to ensure that students could make decisions about what information to include and exclude, the copies of the text did not include stop points. We used a rubric to assess their work (see Table 2) and were pleased to see that after three weeks of instruction, most

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students had mastered the art of summary writing and gotten the “gist” of the story.

Conclusion

The ability to write accurately and efficiently for the purpose of reporting information is a gateway skill for other types of writing, particularly research reports and persuasive essays. However, some middle school writers may struggle with this writing genre because they have difficulty locating pertinent information and rephrasing it in their own words. One form of summary writing, called the *précis*, offers the opportunity to focus on these aspects of writing. In examining both the skills of our students and our philosophy of writing instruction as a deliberate act rather than just an activity to be launched, we used the GIST strategy (Cunningham, 1982; Herrell, 2000) as a way to scaffold instruction in writing a well-crafted *précis*.

We utilized a “gradual release of responsibility”

model (Pearson & Fielding, 1991) at both the micro- and macro-level for this unit. At the micro-level, we began with multiple lessons featuring direct instruction about writing summaries, followed by guided practice as students tried this new strategy for themselves. Over the course of several weeks, we incrementally moved their writing to a more independent phase, thus ensuring that they had access to scaffolding and coaching. At the macro-level, the positioning of summary writing within the curriculum mirrored a gradual release model in writing (Fisher & Frey, 2003) because it utilized a model (GIST) as a means for moving students to independent writing.

The purpose of summary writing instruction does not outweigh the need to make the lessons interesting. By grounding the unit in a popular theme that appealed to adolescents, we attempted to motivate them to engage in the act of memorable *précis* writing. By gaining and maintaining

Table 2. Rubric for Assessing Summary Writing

Name: _____ Summary Title: _____
 Date: _____ Period: _____

| | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---------------------|--|--|--|---|
| Length | 6-8 sentences | 9 sentences | 10 sentences | 11+ sentences |
| Accuracy | All statements accurate and verified by story | Most statements accurate and verified by story | Some statements cite outside information or opinions | Most statements cite outside information or opinions |
| Paraphrasing | No more than 4 words in a row taken directly from story | One sentence contains more than 4 words in a row taken directly from story | Two sentences contain more than 4 words in a row taken directly from story | 3+ sentences contain more than 4 words in a row taken directly from story |
| Focus | Summary consists of main idea and important details only | Summary contains main idea and some minor details | Summary contains main idea and only minor details | Main idea of story is not discussed |
| Conventions | No more than one punctuation, grammar, or spelling error | 2-3 punctuation, grammar, or spelling errors | 4-5 punctuation, grammar, or spelling errors | 6+ punctuation, grammar, or spelling errors |

Overall grade: _____

Comments:

their attention, an essential but somewhat dry form of writing can be transformed into an appealing unit that will leave them with an understanding of how to report the “gist” of a reading.

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Nancy Frey teaches at San Diego State University and the City Heights Educational Collaborative in San Diego. She can be reached at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu. **Douglas Fisher**, San Diego State University, can be reached at dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu. **Ted Hernandez**, City Heights Educational Collaborative, San Diego, California, can be reached at tedher19@yahoo.com.