

INTENSIVE READING

PBI

LEARNING TO SUMMARIZE

SESSION 4

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Definition of Summarize

Summarizing is a very important skill in today's fast-paced world. Being able to convey the most important information concisely and accurately, without wasting any time or causing misunderstandings, is a skill that many managers prize in their employees, and many employees appreciate in their managers.

Summarizing

Summaries omit the detail, and focus on the core, most important points in a longer piece of information. They are top-down, birds-eye views, and are used in all aspects of our lives.

When studying, summarizing is important for note taking, for the same reasons as paraphrasing - it helps link new information to existing information, and cements the most important information in our thoughts. Being able to summarize lengthy articles or papers and link them together, provides the best background or base for a research report.

By learning how to summarize, we are also training ourselves to recognize important information quickly. This is especially useful and time-saving when skimming articles, papers, or websites for information that required to solve a problem.

In the workplace, being able to summarize can save time, when checking your understanding of a task, describing a problem, preparing reports, or recommending solutions to problems. Meetings run faster, and documents are concise and clear.

Advertising is one form that we are exposed to all the time. Only the important (useful) features of a product are noted, usually in very short phrases, designed to catch out attention and desire.

We summarize for our families and friends all the time - instead of explaining every single detail of a trip recently taken or a movie recently seen, we choose to explain only the highlights. Or when giving directions, we explain only the most important decision points (not every street lamp or graffitied wall). Or even when we write notes for our parents to follow, so they don't forget how to access and use their email!

Summarization helps students learn more effectively, but teaching it can be hard. This session is full of techniques and tips for teaching (and learning) the skill of summarizing, with exercises at the end, and a small but important section on paraphrasing.

Summarizing tips

Do:

- use your own words.
- only note the most important points, using key words and phrases.
- read the original text multiple times, ensuring you don't miss any critical points.
- ensure a summary is much shorter than the original source.
- include the original source in the references for a written document.
- read widely and try to develop a summary of the article/book in your head as you read.

Don't:

- include unnecessary details, examples or supporting information.
- include your own opinions or thoughts.
- repeat phrases word for word - this is plagiarism.

Writing a summary essentially takes four steps:

1. Identify the main points of the passage. In some paragraphs, the main idea is expressed in the topic sentence, yet in others, it may not be explicitly stated at all. Additionally, a passage may contain one or more points that are vital to its meaning. These elements must be mentioned in your summary. However, you will not include all the details, as you do in a paraphrase. Instead, only choose the most important.
2. Organize and present these main points in a coherent way. Be careful not to use the author's words or to follow the sentence structure of the original passage.
3. Make sure that you are faithful to the meaning of the source and that you have accurately represented the main ideas.
4. Cite appropriately and integrate the summary into the text effectively. Consult the APA or MLA manual for information on how to cite and the Academic Center handout "Signal the Use of a Source" for ideas on how to integrate summarized information.

The Importance of Summarization

I'm a sucker for good summaries. They are the very definition of efficiency: To say the most with the least. They weave the ideas of the text, lesson, or skill into a coherent whole and shed light on the overall picture.

A good summary accomplishes multiple things:

- Recaps the most important points, facts, statements, or ideas.
- Ties these points into the overall argument, text, or skill.
- Contextualizes the material.

An author who wants to be kind to his/her readers would do well provide a well thought-out summary which helps wash down the bulk of the reading like a cold beverage.

A Gift For Your Thinking

A good summary is like a nicely wrapped package. The outside of the package explains what is inside and shows you what you can expect. However, it isn't until you open the package that you are able to access the gift inside.

Summaries just don't work unless have you read the material they reference. You may get away with sounding knowledgeable but upon the inquiry of a curious individual you will find yourself lost. Therefore to take full advantage of a summary you need two things:

1. To have read or studied the information the summary references.
2. The ability to package that information for later "opening" (studying).

This ability to summarize is extremely important. **Many times we are not given a nicely wrapped gift of a summary; we have to make it ourselves.**

To do so takes paying attention to the finer points and throwing out the unnecessary. If done correctly you will have made leaps and bounds to improving your ability to learn.

Thus, the path to more efficient learning lies in three steps:

1. Paying attention to, reading, or taking part in the lecture, text, or activity.
2. Packaging the details with the most important points into a nicely wrapped gift.
3. Knowing the best way to unwrap that gift later.

Learning How to Package

Step 1: Paying Attention

Bundling together pieces of information for easier recall is nothing new. Our mind naturally likes to categorize.

A prevalent method of learning, called "Chunking," can be used to help memorize the details by clumping them together into easy-to-remember groups.

Look at this number and try to memorize it: 7192620987.

You might get it with a little practice, but now look at it this way: 719-262-0987.

Look more familiar? When bunched up this way (like a phone number) the numbers become easier to remember. The same numbers, just grouped differently, "stick" better in our memory. We can apply this same method to complex ideas by breaking them down into their respective arguments or statements and clumping them together in an organized manner.

How do we do this? By asking some important questions:

1) What's the Point?

Whether you are learning a philosophical argument, a mathematical formula, or a new piece of music, it doesn't matter, find out what is trying to be accomplished. What's the problem, the goal? Why is this important?

This gives you a way to initially categorize the subject and gives it meaning as well.

2) What are the most important pieces?

This can take some effort. Think of the thing you are trying to learn as a house. Forget about the decorations, the furniture, etc.

What is holding that house up?

If it's music there may be certain parts which emphasize the most emotion and the rest of the piece relies upon that feeling. If it's an argument that abortion is okay it's probably a statement about what it means to be a person. A mathematical formula may have a certain point where errors are common and thus extra caution should be used.

Without these "pillars" the house falls apart. These are the "chunks" you want to pay attention to.

3) How do the details fit in?

Start building up those chunked up pieces of information. Learn the parts of the song that help convey the best emotion. Study what the author believes "personhood" to be. Find out how to cautiously avoid the mathematical error. Get out your magnifying glass and zoom in on those details.

Since you've taken the time to figure out the "chunks" then these details will be easier to explore later.

Learning how to pay attention is your biggest asset when it comes to packaging the things you are trying to learn. This takes listening, active participation (whether through discussion or actively thinking about the topic critically during discussion), and a desire to know more.

Step 2: Creating Our Package

Most of us are not blessed with a memory that is able to retain everything after its first exposure. We need repeated efforts combined with well organized notes in order to completely push all of that information into long-term storage.

Note-taking is a tried and true method of enhancing our ability to both memorize and study later, but how we take notes matters. Remember, we want the package to contain all the information we need but if we package it poorly we'll spend a lot of extra effort later trying to get that package opened up whether it's because we used confusing language, tried to write too much, or gave ourselves too little information.

So what is the best way to take notes? Well, the truth is, whatever works best for you. If you're not sure though, here are some good ways to start.

Use a Pen and Paper

Technology continues to make learning things simpler and easier. Curious about something? You can instantly Google it and find all sorts of information. This may tempt

you to bring your laptop to class and use your superior typing speed in order to take down more notes.

However, more is not always better. In recent research done to test the efficacy of typing out vs. writing out notes, those who wrote their notes out the old fashioned way were better able to handle conceptual questions about the topic.

The researchers believe the cause for this is the tendency of those who use a keyboard to take down the lecture verbatim. Those who write out their notes, because of the slow speed, can't afford this luxury, forcing them to summarize what the speaker is presenting.

What's the takeaway from this?

Whether you use pen and paper or a laptop, do not try to take down "exactly" what the lecturer is saying. Instead, focus on summarizing the lecture by getting to its core. This will put an extra load on your comprehension through active engagement of the material, resulting in higher retention.

The Cornell Method

Divide your page into two columns, the right being about twice the size of the left.

The right side is going to be for note-taking while the left is used for keywords or questions. When taking the notes one should be careful not to write out too much. Paraphrase, summarize, and condense as much as possible. As you move along use the left column to write out the big idea keywords for your notes and write down any questions about the topic.

Leave some space at the end of each page. This will be used to summarize the page of notes as a whole (one should attempt this summary no longer than a day after the lecture).

Why is this method of note-taking so effective?

Cognitively, you are essentially packaging, unpackaging, re-packaging, and wrapping a nice little ribbon around the whole thing. The right column condenses the lecture into short comments which is then chunked into a keyword or idea. Any question you may have gets written down which helps to clarify the details creating a more accurate picture of those ideas. Finally, the summarization of the page of notes ties all those points together.

You don't come home from the grocery store and try to carry in each item individually; You bunch them together, making the workload much easier (one trip or bust). When you chunk up the lesson into a clear and concise whole, the details of the lesson are retained more efficiently.

No matter what system you use to take notes it needs to organize the information in a way that can be easily summarized.

Critical Thinking

Your best asset for packaging what you are trying to learn is your ability to think critically about the subject.

Learning important subjects should involve active, deliberate effort.

Thinking critically about the topic allows you to categorize it more efficiently and with more clarity. You get to ask questions about it, clearing up any confusions. You get to pry deeper into the details. Finally, you get to criticize the idea and see how it holds up. All of these activities make the idea clearer to you and connect it to other ideas you already know plenty about. You are better able to see the main points and can summarize it accurately.

When note-taking is not available, you have to actively engage your memory as best you can.

Ready to Ship

The ability to condense a lesson down into a clear summary is an important skill as it requires heavy mental lifting and focused, deliberate attention. Done correctly, these “chunks” of information are more easily retained and accessible for later studying or performance.

It is the role of critical thinking to help clarify and categorize these chunks of information through active participation (criticizing, questioning, ruminating, etc.). This will ensure the summary and corresponding details are not only retained but properly so.

When conducting learning in this way information gets “packaged” in our mental life, able to be opened up in an organized way through studying or performance.

Studying Opening the Package

Without repeated exposure to the material it's unlikely you will be able to retain the information for very long. It's important to treat your studying strategy with the same urgency as your note-taking.

What good is a finely wrapped gift if you never open it?

Best Studying Methods

In an earlier article [I wrote about research detailing the most efficient ways to study.](#)

Interestingly, one of the worst was summarization. This is because summarization, as I've written here, is a tough skill to learn. As a teacher, unless you spend a great deal of time teaching students how to summarize correctly, they will most likely do it poorly, hindering their learning.

As a learner, however, you have the opportunity to improve your ability to summarize which will greatly enhance both note-taking and studying.

Practice Testing

The study found two study methods with the most utility: Practice testing and distributed practice.

Practice testing involves just what it sounds like, issuing yourself a test that looks similar to how the actual test will play out. This method is effective because it doesn't take much learning in order to do and it gives us a sense of how the real deal is going to play out.

But unless your teacher, instructor, or coach provides you with enough information to realistically know what the test is going to look like you may not be able to perform this method.

That is why the next method remains king of study habits.

Distributed Practice

This study method involves using short, dispersed study sessions instead of a few, longer “cram sessions.”

Typically you will start by keeping the space between your study sessions short and gradually increase the time between them as you gain mastery over the subject.

For instance, you get out of class with your stellar notes in hand and the lesson fresh in your mind. Later that afternoon you look over the notes again, taking time to make any additions or changes in order to make them more correct. You do this quickly, not taking much time. You do the same thing again that evening.

Over time you space the study sessions out further. Maybe once a day, then as the semester goes on three times a week. If you have kept up with it by the time the final comes around it should be a piece of cake.

What makes distributed practice so effective? One theory, proposed by Robert Greene, explains that because the study sessions are spread out different contextual information can help the learner encode the information as they gain more knowledge and notes about the subject.

For example, you are taking a class on Plato and learn one of his works. You distribute the study sessions over time. In class, you learn more about his works overall and of his

general ideas. As you go back to those original notes you do so with the added context. This allows you to better understand that particular work through its inclusion in the whole.

Studying in this way is not only highly effective, it can be easier to accomplish (small study sessions) and keeps you motivated (spread out sessions).

Packaging, Unpackaging, Repackaging

Continual progression of our learning involves the action of “going back” every once in a while to check our notes.

This is true no matter what profession, study, or skill we are involved in. Sometimes you have to go back to the things you summarized previously and recheck those details.

This act may make your memory stronger or make you readjust your view of the topic. It also keeps you up to date and fresh.

We package up the lessons we come across in nicely wrapped gifts so that we may utilize them later when performing. It is through the unwrapping and re-wrapping of these concepts, lessons, or skills through periodic study periods that we gain deeper understanding by ruminating with extra contextual information.

Useful Summaries

The longer we go without unwrapping that package the more likely we will forget the details inside. However, this isn't necessarily bad. We can't remember everything, but

remembering the main points can still be useful and can guide our further inquiries should we desire to re-learn the topic.

We can use the information from the summary for discussion, to make a point, or to perform a skill. However, we have to know that if pressed further our knowledge of the details will be found scarce. Sometimes, though, a summary is all we need.

Tying It All Together

Summarizing a lesson after the fact attracts your attention to the important points and weaves them together into an important whole. Taking the time to categorize, condense, and summarize throughout the lesson will help ensure the information gets encoded in your memory.

There are three distinct stages of this process:

1. Exposure to the information.
2. Making sense of that information and storing it for later.
3. Re-examining the information in order to transfer it to long-term memory.

When we are exposed to the information our best strategies involve focused attention with active participation and a concentrated effort to make sense of it all.

Next, we attempt to store that information as best we can for later use through accurate note-taking.

Finally, we periodically must check those notes over time in order for our understanding of the material to be enriched through more contextual knowledge and in order to keep it fresh and up to date.

This entire process is a back-and-forth between summarization and elaboration. Our initial summary gets improved over time through the re-imagining of the topic and more accurate depictions of the important details. The association between the overall and the details gets stronger each time, able to be retained and recalled more easily.

Example Summaries

Let's look at the examples of summarized material. In each of the summaries, you'll notice that we've documented by including the author/year at the end of the passage. Other documentation styles may employ a different technique. Additionally, you'll probably want to vary how you incorporate source material into your paper. The handout "Signal the Use of a Source" can give you some ideas on integrating source material.

Original Passage I:

Height connotes status in many parts of the world. Executive offices are usually on the top floors; the underlings work below. Even being tall can help a person succeed. Studies have shown that employers are more willing to hire men over 6 feet tall than shorter men with the same credentials. Studies of real-world executives and graduates have shown that taller men make more money. In one study, every extra inch of height brought in an extra \$1,300 a year. But being too big can be a disadvantage. A tall, brawny football player complained that people found him intimidating off the field and assumed he "had the brains of a Twinkie." (p. 301)

---Locker, K. O. (2003). *Business and administrative communication* (6th ed.). St. Louis, MO: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.

Let's first identify the main points in the original passage.

- *Topic sentence*: "Height connotes status in many parts of the world."
- *Main point*: "Even being tall can help a person succeed."
- *Main point*: "Executive offices are usually on the top"
- *Main point*: "being too big can be a disadvantage"

For this example, we'll look at multiple summaries. As you read the sample summaries below determine if the main points were included and if the unimportant points were discarded. Also check to see if both wording and sentence structure do not follow those of the original.

Summary A:

Throughout the world, being tall will lead to professional success. In fact, research shows that employers are more likely to hire taller men and to pay them more, as compared to shorter men with the same qualifications (Locker, 2003).

[This summary is too brief. Further, it changes the meaning slightly, giving the impression that being tall guarantees success.]

Summary B:

In most countries, height suggests status. For instance, higher executives normally use top floors of office buildings. Further, research shows that men over six feet tall are more likely to be hired than those shorter than them but with the same

qualifications. Taller men also receive greater incomes, possibly as much as \$1,300 a year more than those only one inch shorter than them. However, as a tall and muscular football player points out, a disadvantage to being tall is that some individuals may perceive you as threatening or even dumb (Locker, 2003).

[This summary is too long. Instead of focusing on the main points, it includes all of the details that are in the original passage.]

Summary C:

Though height may connote slowness to some people, in the business world, it is almost universally associated with success. For example, taller men are more likely to be hired and to have greater salaries. Further, those in top positions within a company are more likely to work on the top floors of office buildings (Locker, 2003).

[This summary is the most effective. In addition to including all of the main points, it leaves out the unimportant details.]

REFERENCES

<https://www.uhv.edu/university-college/student-success-center/resources/e-p/learn-to-summarize/>

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