Writing 25-Word Summaries

Summarizing involves capturing the main idea of a text or paragraph. What makes writing a summary a challenge and difficult for students?

- They need to have read and understood the passage/text.
- The main idea(s) may be stated or implied.
- The summary is in the student’s own words; thus, the reader has made meaning from the text.
- Not every detail is given in a summary, so students have to sort detail from main point. This requires critical thinking skills.
- Sometimes concepts or language are totally new and the students do not have the schema in place to help them figure out how to chunk the text in order to begin to comprehend the information.

The process of summarizing involves analyzing and synthesizing the text; these skills rely on comprehension of the passage. The reader will need to interpret the text. Summarizing actually assists readers in comprehending and remembering larger chunks of reading. Summarizing is a skill that must be practiced.

Faculty often ask why 25 words. Limiting the words is one way to assist students in moving from every idea to the key points. Furthermore, it helps them clarify what are the critical or essential points. The result is something that distills a paragraph or a text to its core.

Students will need modeling and scaffolding in order to prepare a 25-word summary that is concise and to the point. When we model and scaffold for our students, we are giving them an inside track to how experts read the text and how main ideas are distilled from a lot of information.

Modeling is key. Once you have modeled how to read and draft a 25-word summary, then scaffolding is the next step which helps the students gain skills in drafting summaries. Students often need assistance or an example of how to reduce words through sentence structures. For example, most adjective clauses can become appositive phrases. There are many ways to scaffold assignments; some ideas are:

1) Have the students read independently, and then the instructor provides an outline of the key points. Allow the students to fill in the blanks and then to use the provided points and those that they added to the outline to draft a 25-word summary.

2) Have the students read independently and underline the main ideas. Have them discuss these at their tables, and then ask them to create a 25-word summary as a group. Then have them share their summaries by writing them on the white board. Read each out loud and ask the class to note its strengths, weaknesses, and ideas for revision.
3) Have the students read independently, and then work with the entire group to circle the main ideas in the text by thinking aloud with the group responding. Write all of the main ideas on the board. Then rearrange information to create a 25-word summary.

How to Move Ahead with Having Your Students Create a 25-Word Summary

Look at the title or subheading, if there is one. What is the passage about? That is the topic and from that we can begin to figure out the main ideas about the topic. Read the passage once with no mark ups just to get a sense of the text. Circle the unknown words and phrases. Try to use word parts such as prefix, root, and suffix to discern the meaning. See if there is a pattern or grouping to the words. Annotate the definition next to the word. Then re-read the passage and mark the main ideas in one color. Using the highlighted sentences, try to verbalize or write out a sentence or two that captures all of the main points. Cross off extra information such as specifics and details that support the key point. I use the verbal clue: “So this passage or this paragraph focuses on... or this text is about....” Then the students individually write a 25-word summary. These are shared and compared at the tables with their classmates. Then each table collaborates to create a new team 25-word summary. Then we report out and note the strengths and differences among the samples.

If students express reluctance, here are some prompts that can help the students get started.
- This passage/text is really about.....
- The most important information in the text is ....
- The author’s main point is ....
- This is about....
- I know that the main point is ....

Use a graphic organizer like the one below to separate information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Main idea/point</th>
<th>Supporting Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A good rule of thumb is that you can never really model too much when you are apprenticing readers, and these routines should be embedded as classroom routines. With practice, students become much more articulate summary writers, thinkers, and readers. In addition, the ability to write concise summaries is a life and workplace skill that is often lacking in students. Learning how to write a summary in class with the experts (the program faculty) is an invaluable skill.

For More Information

For more information about writing 25-word summaries, visit the RTC Library’s LibGuide about Reading Apprenticeship® and RATs at http://libguides.rtc.edu/rats. At the LibGuide, click on the Reading Apprenticeship Routines drop down menu, and then on the 25-Word Summary option. There you will find ready-to-use templates, links to websites and a sampling of helpful RTC Library materials.

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