

Literacy Tips



Tips for middle school educators on various topics such as grammar, writing, reading, spelling, vocabulary, cooperative learning and more.

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Tip #23: Summarizing Nonfiction Text

Last week I wrote about the importance of summarizing information in order to improve student comprehension. This week's tip is a continuation of those thoughts but with an emphasis on non-fiction text.

1. V.I.P.'s - Very Important Points

Do you remember this tip from a while ago? I feel the need to mention it again because it really helps students determine important information in non-fiction text. Half the battle of writing an effective summary is being first able to determine the main ideas.

Model for the students with your own think aloud how to pull out main ideas from a text. Demonstrate using fringed sticky notes. (Simply take a larger sized post-it note and tear off 3-4 strips.) Show students how to mark up the text with this post-it note fringe. This is a very nice substitute for highlighting. This strategy is called the V.I.P.'s (very important points). Students know they can only use 3-4 pieces of the fringe, so this will force them to evaluate their main ideas before choosing them. (Hoyt, Linda. Make It Real. Portsmouth: Heinemann Publishers, 2002)

An adaptation would be to have the kids start with 6 post-it notes strips. After they determine the 6 most important ideas in

the selection, challenge them to narrow it down to 5. Which one will they take away and why? Then have them narrow it down to 4 explaining their thoughts. If you have them write about their decision making process, try using this direction - "show me the "inking" of your "thinking." (I thought that was clever! I heard that at a conference I recently attended...) Keep this pattern going until you feel they have the right amount of main ideas in order to summarize effectively.

It is crucial to model the difference between what students find interesting in what they read compared to what is really important. Use a T chart. Label the left side important information and the right side interesting information. During your whole group modeling, discuss the differences. (Harvey, Stephanie and Anne Goudvis. Strategies That Work. York: Stenhouse, 2000)

2. Writing Effective Topic Sentences

Once students have determined what they plan to say in a summary, they need a way to start. The Step Up to Writing resource binder teaches students how to write an A + B + C topic sentence. Most students begin summaries this way: "This article was about..." Maureen Auman (author of the Step Up to Writing program) teaches



students to include three things for an effective summary topic sentence:

- A = Identify what you are reading
- B = Select a strong verb (no "to be" verbs allowed)
- C = Finish your thought with the big idea of the text

With the information found on pages 3-3 to 3-14 in the 2nd edition binder (pages 3-2 to 3-17 in the 1st edition), I have created [a one page handout](#) to help guide students through writing an effective summary topic sentence.

3. Money Summaries

(Step Up to Writing, pages 8-22 to 8-23, 2nd edition and pages 8-26 to 8-27 in the 1st edition)

This strategy can help those writers who write too much in their summaries and need practice with writing concisely.

"In a money summary, each word costs a certain amount. Students are told how much money they have to spend and how much words will cost. I usually tell my students that the three articles a, the, and an are free. Sometimes the goal is to write the shortest summary possible; at other times the goal is to spend as much money as you are given. In either case, the goal is to write a complete sentence and not a headline. This game does not lead to a true summary, so it is probably better to call it a "sum up" activity. The game, however, is fun and helps students focus on themes and main ideas in the articles or stories they read. It also gives them the chance to learn to be concise in their writing."

Words cost 10 cents

You have \$2.00

Goal: to have the best summary with the most money left!

Example: Summary for "I'm Nobody" by Emily Dickinson

A poet prefers a quiet life. (40 cents)

4. The 12 Word Trick

(Step Up to Writing, 8-24 in the 2nd edition and 8- 28 in the 1st edition.)

"After watching a film, reading an article, or reading a story select 12 words that will help you recall what you have learned. Write these down. if possible, look for connections in the words. Write a two or three sentence summary using the 12 words. A few days or weeks later, try writing down all 12 words. You will be surprised how many you remember."



WRITING EFFECTIVE SUMMARIES

A. Identify!

You can identify what you are summarizing in a variety of ways. The following are okay, better, and best ways to identify what it is you are summarizing.

OK: The book
 The film
 The article

BETTER: *Painless Public Speaking*
Forrest Gump
"Going Under the Light"

BEST: *Painless Public Speaking* by
 Sharon Bower
 The movie, *Forrest Gump*
 "Going Under the Light" from
 Newsweek, October 2, 1995

B. Select a Verb!

acknowledges	evaluates
adds	explains*
advises	explores
answers	expresses
asks	features
asserts	furnishes
assures	gives
blames	identifies
captures	illustrates
clarifies	invites
classifies	judges
compares*	lists*
confirms	misjudges
confronts	names
confuses	offends
contrasts	praises
considers	predicts
critiques	presents*
demonstrates	proposes
defends	provides
defines*	recommends
denounces	shows*
depicts	simplifies
describes*	solves
discourages	suggests
encourages	supports
endorses	teaches
entertains	tells*
entices	traces

C. Finish Your Thought!

The final part of the topic sentence is easy if you just ask yourself:

- *What is the big idea?*
- *What is the big concept?*
- *What is the main idea of the item that I am summarizing?*

Keep in mind that this is just your topic sentence and that you will be adding all of the facts in the body of your summary paragraph.

Step Up to Writing by Maureen Auman
<http://www.sopriswest.com>

A + B + C = TOPIC SENTENCE *Painless Public Speaking* by Sharon Bower provides a number of practical hints for people who are afraid of speaking in front of a group.

BODY: Create a fact outline. Then add those facts to your paragraph in sentence form.

HELPFUL HINTS: Use transitions only if they help. Summaries do not need a formal conclusion. If you force a conclusion, it might sound awkward. Also formal conclusions include opinions - you do not want an opinion in a summary.