

## Using the Summary to Teach Critical Reading and Writing

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Every teacher is familiar with vacuous silences in the classroom. They usually occur after a simple question has been asked, for example "Who can tell us basically what happens in Frost's 'Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening'? On the most literal level--in your own words--what happens in the poem?" Vacuous silence ensues. This phenomenon, of course, exposes the difference between two levels of learning proficiency. One hopes that after two or three degrees' worth of study, and perhaps some years of teaching experience, the teacher has acquired certain learning skills which have become second nature to him. The teacher takes up a novel, an essay, or a poem, reads--and understands. He knows how to learn. The freshman English student, however, usually has yet to obtain this most fundamental part of his education. And the teacher often finds it difficult to return--mentally--to the stage of learning at which his students find themselves. For the teacher, past years fade away; he has forgotten what road he traveled by to reach his present abilities.

The recollection of the stages we progressed by may be eternally irrecoverable, but we can examine where we and the students are now. The most popular student method of learning is, unquestionably, the well-known "yellow felt marker technique." But notice that students do not wield this instrument in the same way their teachers would. They pick out isolated significant remarks, definitions, dates, catchy phrases, and anything else that seems "important." At the end of the process, the students recall separate ideas or examples, but a comprehensive understanding of what they have read remains elusive. A comprehensive understanding is precisely what the teacher inexplicably possesses at the conclusion of his reading of the same work. The teacher also checks salient points, albeit in pencil, and underlines notable passages. He may even carry on a running dialogue with the text in the margins. But unlike his student counterpart, the teacher has a different objective: he is seeking to perceive and sometimes to impose order in the material. Mentally, he is gathering up the material of a summary.

The basic college composition course usually includes reading assignments in which the summarizing skill can be practiced. In

most cases, non-fiction is more susceptible to student summary than are fiction or poetry. But even beginning with a clear argumentative essay, the teacher soon finds that teaching the summary is no simple process. He tries a demonstration. In an attempt to expose his own mental process, he progresses through an assigned essay, paragraph by paragraph, building from transition to transition. Finally, he collects the main points and arrives at the author's conclusion. Then the teacher pronounces himself ready to attempt a summary. He presents a terse paragraph which inevitably contains familiar material from his previous step-by-step analysis. The next essay is for the students to summarize. Naturally, what results includes everything but a summary. A typical yield includes a swarm of mere conclusions, unaccompanied by a basic sketch of how those conclusions were reached; a bundle of disjunct ideas which particularly dazzled the readers; a few 375-word summaries of a 425-word essay; and a drift of personal opinions, such as "I suppose this is a well-organized essay, but frankly I find it hard to get what the guy is trying to say." Then follows a period of weeks during which the teacher explains why none of these is a summary and offers up occasional laudatory readings of the summaries of the few students who, perhaps only by luck, fulfilled the assignment. But dawns have a way of arriving. Finally, the teacher assigns Joseph Wood Krutch's "The Shoddy Ethics of Alienation," and he receives:

In his essay "The Shoddy Ethics of Alienation" Joseph Wood Krutch expresses his lack of sympathy with beatniks, intellectuals, artists, and other fashionable people who respond to social ills by proclaiming their alienation from society and by broadcasting its decadence. Their responses of destruction, dissipation, and complaint only produce self-injury, futility, and sometimes even comic contradiction. Even the serious people who are concerned with social problems take an impossible approach when they try to take on the improvement of society and the human race as a whole. The betterment of society, according to this essay, depends upon the improvement of the individuals who compose it. We can improve society best by embracing the concepts of personal integrity, virtue, and honor.

The requirement of a summary with each reading assignment has the tangential benefits of assuring that the assignments are read and of providing another opportunity for practicing mechanics. But the desired objective is that the student will understand, be able to talk about, retain, and perceive a structure in what he reads.

The next step is to transfer this skill to student writing. There's a convincing logic in the thought that if you can't think about what you read, you can't think about what you write either. So a new assignment seems reasonable: every time a student writes an essay, he must also prepare a paragraph summary of what he has written. Of course, he is applying to his own work the skills he has learned in reading the works of others. The student concomitantly assesses his own work. If his work is incoherent, fraught with irrelevancies, and devoid of a thesis,

he is going to have a hard time writing a summary. Undoubtedly, he will try. He will hand in a summary of the essay he wishes he had written or of the essay he thought he had written. He'll try getting by with the mention of a few main points or with a truncated conclusion or thesis statement. He may produce something that is, indeed, part of a summary. Or he may resort to the decoy of an amusing, tacitly apologetic, anecdote of how his essay was executed under unique and inventive circumstances in the dorm last night. But, as in his eventual acquisition of summarizing skill in reading, he will progress through class discussion, explanation, and criticism, toward writing an essay that can be summarized. This brings us to the desideratum of all desideratum: through the use of summary in critical reading and writing, the student can learn to demand coherent thinking of himself before he writes instead of after (if only to complete the assignment).