

# Summarizing, Paraphrasing, and Retelling

Skills for Better Reading,  
Writing, and Test Taking

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# Introduction

I started teaching language arts at the height of the whole language movement. The supervisor in my district had removed the old scope and sequence, drill and kill–based curriculum in favor of a far more open curriculum that allowed teachers to plan their own lessons and make their own judgments. “But I have no judgment!” I remember wailing to my mother, also a teacher. “How do you think I learned what to do?” she asked, and showed me her bookshelf, which was covered with stacks and stacks of professional books. I got the message. I couldn’t expect to make it through a career of teaching with only the knowledge I had picked up in a handful of undergraduate courses. If I was going to be successful, I needed to read. And read. And read.

During the next few years, I amassed my own collection of books. When I came to a thorny patch in my instruction—for example, how to get students to apply grammar skills to their writing—I would look through the books for ideas and solutions. If I didn’t find the answer in my own books, I would borrow from my mother’s bookshelf or the reading specialist’s. I knew that I couldn’t become comfortable with every aspect of teaching reading and writing in one year, so I slowly built on my knowledge base and developed my own judgment.

This helped me to cope with the changes that swept through my classroom during the course of the next seven years. I started teaching seventh grade writing, then added sixth grade writing to the mix. When Integrated Language Arts came to our school a few years later, I was thrilled to be able to teach a ninety-minute block of reading and writing. Our state outcomes became content standards, our state testing program was transformed from performance-based assessment to “selected response,” or multiple choice, and the district middle school reading and writing department was headed by three different supervisors who

dispersed three different curriculum manuals. As if these changes were not enough, I uprooted myself after seven years and went to teach a self-contained sixth grade class in a tiny rural district. Moving from a district with 28,000 students to a district with 1,800 was quite a culture shock.

Some people may have found the pace frustrating, but I liked the excitement. I learned how to adapt to new thinking and new ideas while still holding on to the philosophies and structures that worked in my classroom. The more things changed, the more I could see how some things remained the same. Whether I was teaching to outcomes or standards, whether my curriculum was organized according to theme or genre, whether I had a classroom with windows, I faced young adolescents every day. All the books in the world cannot prepare a teacher for what happens once the students walk into the room.

I certainly wasn't prepared to teach summarizing. Included as a content standard and an assessment anchor, I knew that summarizing was important, and I dutifully tried to help my sixth and seventh graders write summaries of both fiction and nonfiction texts. I envisioned smoothly written short pieces, like those in *TV Guide*, that would elegantly capture the essence of a text with a minimum of words.

What I got were stacks of bizarre constructions that claimed to be summaries—or “sumeries,” as my students often wrote—that either copied whole sentences of text, focused on just one section, or missed the main points altogether. Sometimes I wondered if the students had read the same text that I had. The more able students could occasionally pull together a coherent comment or two, but often they would try to jam a summary into the traditional paragraph template—topic sentence, supporting details, concluding sentence.

I learned many things from the article. How tomb robbers took things from tombs, what they stole from tombs, and what they were like. It was a great article.

I wasn't sure of how to help them. My usual comments—“Elaborate. Add more. Give more detail”—are not helpful for summarizing. The students thought I had become temporarily insane when I told them, “That's too long. Make it short. Are those details necessary?”

Standing in front of the classroom with a student summary on the overhead projector, I struggled to explain to the students why it was not effective.

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“But the article is about trees, right?” Patrick asked from the front row. “So why can’t I say, ‘This article is about trees?’”

I floundered. As the teacher, I was supposed to know these things! “It’s not good writing,” I said, finally.

“It sounds good to me,” Patrick said, to a chorus of agreement from elsewhere in the room. “I think it’s fine.”

I tried to use various graphic organizers or catchy formulas, but I couldn’t find anything that would work with every text every time. “Write down the main points and important details,” I told the students, only to realize that they could not *find* the main points or identify the important details.

To make matters worse, the usual rubric we used to assess reading comprehension questions did not work for summaries. We were focused on getting kids to include text evidence in their responses to questions. However, summaries don’t require explicit text evidence or references back to the text, and when kids tried to add those elements, they created some pretty strange responses.

This article was about tomb robbers in ancient Egypt. I know this because the author made the title be “Tomb Robbers and the Mummy’s Treasure.” The author explained what treasures were in tombs and how the tomb robbers stole the treasures. I know this because the author said so.

So I was faced with teaching something that I couldn’t explain and couldn’t assess. It was time to hit the books and find out what was really going on.

Strangely, though, I didn’t find very much written about summarizing. There were a few pages in a content area reading textbook, scattered mentions in books about reading strategies, and philosophical ruminations about what is important in a text. Most discussions of summarizing cited the same research and listed the same steps for helping kids to improve their work. I found little to tell me why students don’t summarize well, what skills students need to write good summaries, or the relationship between summarizing and reading comprehension.

I knew that summarizing was important. Not only is it included on content standards and tested on yearly assessments, but it is also a skill used in everyday life. But the question remained—how would I teach it?

I expanded my search beyond the usual reference books and into the realm of journal articles. Although there were many articles about

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summarizing through the mid and late 1980s, the topic dropped off the scene through much of the past fifteen years, relegated to mentions in articles aimed at high school and college teachers.

As teachers and students in my district focused on writing good reading responses and finding text evidence to support their thinking, there was little direct instruction in the skills required for summarizing.

This was and is a shame. The more I learned about summarizing, the more I became convinced that it is a keystone skill for reading. Summarizing deserves more than a brief mention in a language arts curriculum. The ability to summarize is at the heart of comprehension, the very essence of what we want kids to be able to do. A few scattered activities and lists of steps won't help kids to grasp the power of skillful summarizing.

Using what I learned from the journal articles, I worked to break down the skills required for summarizing. There are many! It requires the purposeful synthesis of a number of discrete reading strategies and skills. No wonder my students were having such problems. Many of my colleagues were facing the same problems that I was. "I try to skip through summaries as quickly as I can," another teacher confessed to me. "What is the difference between a summary and a retelling?" someone else asked.

If we want to help our students to become engaged, strategic readers, we must include summarizing instruction in our reading and language arts classrooms. As you will see, summarizing is a skill with far-reaching implications for reading comprehension and content area success. The time spent on teaching summarizing strategies will only help our students to become more efficient, more effective learners.

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# 2

## SUMMARIZING, PARAPHRASING, AND RETELLING

### *Related, But Not the Same*

The scene was grim. Eight of us were packed into a cramped, unair-conditioned room, spending the first week of our summer in a kind of curricular sweatshop. Our task was daunting: to unite the previously divided middle school reading and writing programs into one cohesive class. And write 100 days of curriculum in one week, using enough detail so that reading teachers could confidently teach the writing components and writing teachers could teach the reading. The sixth grade table had rapidly devolved into a bizarre reading–writing turf war.

“I don’t think retelling is something we want to assess in middle school,” a reading specialist said. “I mean, just being able to spit back the characters and plot of a story doesn’t show any higher level thinking.” To those of us who had taught writing, she said, patronizingly, “One of the goals of teaching reading is to get kids to think critically.”

Really.

“Are you talking about retelling or summarizing?” asked a veteran teacher.

“Aren’t they both the same thing?” someone else asked.

“If we include retelling—or summarizing—would it be a reading activity or a writing activity?”

“How would we assess it?”

“Well,” said one teacher, who came from the more affluent part of the district, “I don’t think summarizing is a skill that we should have to teach in middle school. It’s time that we stop babying students and expect them to use what they learned in elementary school.”

“Or should have learned,” someone else chimed in. Reading teachers and writing teachers united momentarily to agree that students should have already learned basically everything before arriving in middle school.

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I've found that there's no way to win one of these arguments. In this case, nothing I could have said would have convinced any of these teachers that they were wrong. (Despite the fact that I was the only one who had actually taught reading and writing together, I was still considered a "writing" teacher, and therefore unable to comprehend reading issues!) This group perpetuated four pervasive myths about the related skills of summarizing, paraphrasing, and retelling.

### **Myth 1: Summarizing, Paraphrasing, and Retelling Are All the Same**

Like many myths, this one has a grain of truth. Summarizing, paraphrasing, and retelling are closely related processes, and the ability to summarize depends on some level of skill with paraphrasing and retelling.

However, each of these processes is important in its own right as a tool for comprehension and discussion. When students know the difference between these skills, they can choose the one they need for each circumstance.

### **Myth 2: Summarizing Is the Same as Recall**

Many reading teachers have downplayed simple recall in recent years. Being able to pick out one detail from a passage doesn't show that a reader has a well-developed understanding of the passage. However, summarizing requires students to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize ideas. This is not just spitting back an answer! The reader processes text in one form, makes judgments about the ideas, and restates the text in a new form. This requires higher level thinking.

### **Myth 3: Students Should Already Know How to Do This**

Summarizing, retelling, and paraphrasing are important skills for readers of all levels, even those in college and beyond. Saying that students should have "learned" these skills in a previous class or grade is like saying that students should have learned how to write in first grade and therefore need no more instruction in the topic. The logic just doesn't work.

A third grade teacher may do an excellent job of working with students to summarize third grade text; but, in eighth grade, text is much more complex. Students who mastered summarizing in third grade may need explicit instruction in meeting the new demands of eighth grade-level text.

**Myth 4: Summarizing Is Really an Assessment of Writing, Not Reading**

It's a fact of life that we can't look into a student's head and see how she comprehends a text. In this day of large class sizes, we can't always confer with every student, either. There will always need to be some kind of written assessment of reading.

Assessing written work always carries some risks. The surface features of a student's response—that is, the grammar, punctuation, and spelling—can overshadow the ideas. This problem, fortunately, is easily solved. A good rubric can help a teacher focus on just the aspects of a summary that reflect reading comprehension. Even a student who is a poor writer can show an understanding of a text in a written summary.

Many standardized tests have avoided the reading/writing question altogether by putting summary questions into multiple-choice format and asking students to choose the best summary of a passage. This is a way that summarizing can be assessed without intimidating students who may not feel comfortable with writing tasks.

**The True Facts About Summarizing, Paraphrasing, and Retelling**

Summarizing, paraphrasing, and retelling are important parts of any reading and writing curriculum. Before I could start working with these skills in my classroom, though, I needed to figure out exactly how they fit together. Although summarizing is usually mentioned first, it is actually the last stop on a pathway of increasingly complex skills. This pathway begins with paraphrasing.

***Paraphrasing***

When students are admonished to “put things in their own words” when taking notes, they are actually being told to paraphrase. Paraphrasing is, quite simply, restating ideas in different words. A reader (or listener) can choose to paraphrase one statement, a group of statements, or an entire passage. This is quite different from retelling and summarizing, both of which require a reader to gain a global picture of the text.

Paraphrasing can be oral or written. Orally, it can be as simple as, “Put my last directions into your own words.” A written paraphrase can be much more complex, as students could paraphrase formally written text by rewriting it in an informal style.

So paraphrasing is not that difficult. Another step along the pathway takes us to retelling.

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## *Retelling*

Retelling is quite simple. After hearing or reading a story, a child “retells” the events to a listener. Many children will spontaneously retell exciting events, books, or movies to one another (and to any other listener who happens to be within earshot!). In recent years, retelling has become more popular as a tool for both instruction and assessment. Although some books will refer to “written retellings,” for the purposes of this book, retelling is considered an oral event.

How does retelling begin? Children develop the ability to tell a story with a logical sequence of events between the ages of two and five (Wagner, Sahlén, and Nettelblat 1999). In fact, story retelling has been recognized as a predictor of which preschoolers will have language delays in first grade (Fazio, Naremore, and Connell 1996). Children who have problems retelling stories seem to be more likely to have problems with reading comprehension in later years.

This information is available because education researchers have a long history of working with retelling. Retelling has been used for years as a dependent variable in reading research experiments. After a researcher has done some intervention—a teaching method, questioning strategy, and so on—and asked students to read a text, the benefits of that intervention are measured by asking the student to retell what was read. The retelling is then scored based on a list of criteria to be included. Some retellings are “cued,” with the student prompted to give specific information, either by a story grammar chart or direct questioning. Others are simply given on a free recall basis.

From the education research journals, retelling made its way to the classroom. And with good reason. Retelling is far from being just a regurgitation of facts and events. A 1985 study showed that repeated practice in retelling—even with minimal teacher instruction—improves reading comprehension, with transfer to future reading tasks (Gambrell, Pfeiffer, and Wilson 1985). Retelling is beneficial for students from preschool to college and beyond. Because it is an oral activity, retelling is an excellent bridge from social literacy activities into silent, individual ones. Being able to talk through a story helps children to process what went on, and come to a new understanding of events or information.

I was excited to learn about retelling, because it seemed an easy way to help my students become better readers and writers. I was even more excited to see how the pathway through paraphrasing and retelling led me to my eventual goal: summarizing.

*Summarizing*

If paraphrasing is just restating ideas, and a retelling is completely oral, what is a summary? This question has plagued researchers—and students—for years. Definitions for a summary abound. It may be most useful to study some of the important characteristics of a summary. Although there are some issues still up for debate, most people agree on the following points.

*A summary should be shorter than the original text.* How much shorter? It depends. A fifteen-page article could be summarized in one page, two pages, or even a single paragraph, depending on the purpose of the summary and the needs of the audience.

*A summary should include the main ideas of the text.* Although this sounds easy enough, it's where most students, and most adults, have trouble. Stating the main ideas of a text is easy when the author comes out and states them. The task becomes much more difficult when the main ideas are implicit, or unstated, as is usually the case in fiction.

*A summary should reflect the structure and order of the original text.* This can become another stumbling block. Fiction text written in chronological order is easiest for students to summarize. When it comes to nonfiction, however, authors use a variety of structures. Most students are used to the form of text that states a main point and then supports that point with details. (That's the structure I've used in most of this book.) However, if a text is written in compare-and-contrast order, the summary should follow suit.

*A summary should include important details.* "But how do I know which details are important?" students ask, and research shows that adolescents don't always agree with adults on the importance of specific ideas (Garner et al. 1989). But summaries do need to include the details that support an author's main points.

A summary, therefore, is a shortened version of an original text, stating the main ideas and important details of the text with the same text structure and order of the original. It had taken me time, but I could finally lay the myths of summarizing to rest. I knew what summarizing was, how paraphrasing was completely different, and why a retelling and

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a summary could never be confused. Unfortunately, I didn't learn these things in time for curriculum writing.

The argument at the sixth grade table evaporated as our supervisor came over. "Everything going well?" he asked, and all at the table smiled and nodded.

"You know," said the reading specialist, after he left, "we only have to write 100 days worth of lessons. We could always leave it up to the individual teachers whether or not to teach summarizing."

Another teacher nodded. "That way, those of us with—uh, more advanced kids—can move on to lessons that will really benefit them." She looked pointedly at me.

"Besides," someone else said, "if we were going to have summarizing tasks, we'd need to have anchor papers, rubrics, assessments—it's just too much work."

Actually, I was glad of their decision. It gave me the freedom to spend the next few years teaching summarizing on my own, working through the myths and misconceptions, and developing some pretty good lessons. Before I could go back and teach my students, though, I needed to settle the question: What makes a good summary?

### **Chapter Summary**

- Although summarizing, paraphrasing, and retelling are related, they are somewhat different in process, form, and product.
- A summary is a shortened version of an original text. A summary should include all main ideas and important details, while reflecting the structure and order of the original.
- A reader paraphrases by restating ideas from a text in a new way.
- Retelling is orally restating what is remembered from the text.