Summary Writing: Part I

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Introduction

The primary objective of this article is to introduce the readers to the nuances of writing a summary. It will be published in three parts in different issues of LLT.

Summary writing is not just a part of the language curriculum but is needed in our day to day activities as well. Students have traditionally been taught how to summarize or write a precis in their language classes. While doing this, the emphasis has been on condensing both information and language in order to provide a gist of the original. While it is important for summaries to be accurate, there is no clear-cut methodology for either teaching summary writing or for assessing the summaries produced. In addition, it is assumed that a complete and elegant statement is always required in a summary.

Objectives of Writing a Summary

Writing a summary clarifies its content and brings it into focus, regardless of whether it is the summary of a passage, an oral interaction or a situation. In fact engaging students in writing summaries is an excellent training for note-taking. It trains them in addressing the pitfalls of attempting to take down the words of the teacher verbatim and instead helps them concentrate on the main points being made. It is also an important mental skill necessary for success in many fields of life.

A summary has to include all the main points of what is being said or written and be well organized; it must be complete in itself, with a beginning, middle and an end. The essence of the argument must be developed in a logical fashion in the summary. This may be done by imposing a logical structure in a text which is loosely organized. In developing its structure, the summary has to link related features together and signal the relationship between them either by numbering the statements and / or using cohesive devices for linking the argument.

It has to be borne in mind that a real world summary is often quite different from that written for a language examination, which has restrictions of length, format and style. In addition, there may be personal and cultural differences relating to perceptions of the topic, and the rhetorical organization of the summary. Assessing the potential readership is therefore quite important when writing a summary.

The Three Articles

In this first article of a series of three, I shall look at an approach to summarization which is concerned with how to identify the main points expressed in an expository writing. I shall call this a "top-down" approach for it starts with the central ideas and works downwards to the minor ideas. In the second article, I will introduce a totally different approach which I call the "bottom-up" approach. In this approach, we begin with the building blocks of language—the clause structure—and understand how it

helps in identifying the main ideas. In the third article, I will deal with the concept of schematic summaries which is related to itemized note-taking. In the same article, I will also address variable focus summaries, i.e., summaries written from the same material but for different purposes, with a different focus and for different readers. In the last article, I shall attempt to deal with the assessment of summaries for classroom purposes.

The Top-Down Approach

The Top-Down Approach is based on the rhetorical analysis of Winter (1976) and Hoey (1983), who follows the tradition of Winter. These writers are concerned with analyzing the patterns of rhetorical organization in the text. They identify "Problem-Solution" as the overriding pattern in an expository prose. As most summaries within the educational system are based on expository writing, such a pattern is obviously more relevant as a framework. This pattern can be explained by means of the following brief example:

Consider this highly simplified text (Winter, 1976; Hoey, 1983):

"I was on sentry duty. I saw the enemy approaching. I opened fire. I beat off the attack".

In the Winter-Hoey format, these statements can be categorized thus:

I was on sentry duty.	SITUATION
I saw the enemy approaching.	PROBLEM
I opened fire.	RESPONSE
I beat off the attack.	EVALUATION

The first sentence establishes the context or the situation in which the action takes place. This is followed by the problem which requires a solution or more neutrally, a response, and finally an evaluation of the success of the response to the problem.

This text is a simplistic example. It can however become complicated in several ways by varying the logical statement of its argument. For instance, the problem may be stated before the situation is presented:

"I saw the enemy approaching." (problem) "while I was on sentry duty" (situation);

or the evaluation before the response:

"I beat off the attack" (evaluation) "by opening fire" (response).

More stages can also be brought into the argument. The following example from Hoey (1983) illustrates this:

Situation	I was on sentry duty.
Problem	I saw the enemy approaching.
Response	I tried to open fire.
(inner problem)	The gun's bolt jammed.
Inner response	Staying calm, I applied a drop of oil.
Inner evaluation	That did the trick.
Response	I opened fire.
Evaluation/Result	I beat off the attack.

Many more variations are possible as explained in Winter (1976), Hoey (1983), and Jordan (1984). However, one need not get lost in the details of the variety in patterns. The basic four parts of the pattern alone can provide an elegantly simple framework for a summary. An example of a text is now given to demonstrate how the analysis can proceed.

Passage for summarization

The disturbing effects of the technological revolution may be felt in all fields. Oil tankers with unlimited capacities are built without considering the consequences of accidents. Detergents foam on our streams and lakes. Automobiles outrace safety standards, urban noises challenge our eardrums, and hidden eyes and ears invade our privacy.

Before answers can be found to these problems, it is necessary to understand two characteristics of the technological revolution—that it is mindless and that it is neutral. It is mindless because pure science is simply a desire to know, to uncover the facts, to unlock the secrets. A mind must be super-imposed onto it if it is to have any limitations. The technological developments described above are inevitable unless man actively decides to stop their development. Scientists will continue learning how to unwind the intricacies of DNA, transplant organs, and implant electrodes in the brain as long as there are unknown areas and as long as they are not specifically forbidden to do so.

It is neutral because the changes, in themselves, brought about by the technological revolution, are neither good nor bad. They acquire a value only by the way in which they are used. Science can tell us what we can do, but not what we should do. It can tell us how to do something, but not if we should do it. The possibilities for good and evil of many of the developments described above stagger the imagination and recall the use of atomic power.

Because the revolution challenging medicine and mankind is mindless and because it is neutral, mind must be imposed on it to control it and determine its values. The present failure to do this has created a wide gap between man's technological and humanistic imagination. Mindless technology threatens to become a monster, destroying its creator. The visions of the future could become ghosts. This is a warning being sounded increasingly often by thoughtful men, the warning asked editorially, by The New York Times on the morning after Hiroshima had been bombed: "Can mankind grow up quickly enough to win the race between civilization and disaster?"

(Passage and preliminary exercise taken from Lukmani et al., 1981)

A mode of analysis is now put forward following the problem-solution pattern discussed earlier, to build up to a summary. This kind of guidance, if provided to the student might make the task of summarization considerably easier.

Analysis

This passage is organized according to the following pattern:

1. Problem
2. Analysis of problem
3. Response /suggested solution

There are various ways in which the task of identifying this particular rhetorical pattern can be approached. The task can be made easier or more difficult depending on the class in which the student is studying.

One of the means of making the task simpler is to build up to it by asking the student to respond to pointed questions. A format for going through the stage of answering preliminary questions for the passage is provided as follows:

Procedures Leading to the Summary

First, answer the following questions in brief before attempting the outline of the summary. Consider the questions as rough work leading up to the actual summarization exercise.

1.a) Which concrete facts of daily life have made the writer anxious enough to probe the problem of technological revolution?

b) Are these examples of a more general trend or the only disturbing factors that exist?

c) Faced with these problems, what is the writer trying to do?

2. What are the characteristics of the technological revolution?

a) _____

b) _____

3. Reasons for characteristics

a) _____

b) _____

4.a) What is the solution suggested by the writer?

b) What is the reason for suggesting this solution?

c) What has the failure to achieve an appropriate solution resulted in?

The following instructions are given to the students for answering these questions:

a) List out each point separately. In the case of a sub-point use a new line.

b) Separate the ideas from the examples / ideas from the reasons for holding that idea.

The summary could then read as follows:

Statement of problem: The disturbing effects of the technological revolution may be felt in all fields.

Analysis: It is necessary to understand two characteristics of the technological revolution—that it is mindless and that it is neutral. It is mindless because pure science is simply a desire to know. It is neutral because the changes, in themselves, brought about by the technological revolution are neither good nor bad.

Suggested solution: Because the revolution challenging medicine and mankind is mindless and because it is neutral, the mind must be imposed on it to control it and determine its values.

It should now be clear from this illustration that an expository text can be divided into three main sections.

1. The statement of the problem
2. Analysis
3. Suggested solution

Students learn to analyse a discourse in this way and identify the different aspects of the situation: the problem, the response to the problem, and the evaluation of the response, along with several variations and elaborations of these. They can now use this pattern to formulate their summary. Thus, the use of this broad rhetorical pattern can facilitate analysis of the text and identification of the main points.

It has to be borne in mind that the order of the rhetorical patterns in the text may differ from what is required in the summary of that text. In the summary, a very logical type of organization is needed so that even if in the text, the problem is stated before the situation, in the summary, it has to be the situation which is presented first, and then the problem.

Again, in a summary, lifting chunks from the text is not bad in itself; indeed, it is a desirable state of affairs for learners, at least in the first stage of summary writing. Relief from the burden of the composition allows them to focus

their entire attention on the ideas central to the text. Then once they have isolated the main ideas and perceived the logical structure of the text, they can turn their attention to polishing the expression and adding cohesive links, particularly if the major headings (such as the ones provided in the analysis) are to be removed.

Other broad classes of intersecting relations are also found to exist in a text within rhetorical patterns such as problem-solution (Winter, 1976, 1978; Hoey, 1983). There are two such major classes of intersecting relations—logical sequence relations and matching relations. Logical sequence relations are relations between successive events or ideas, whether actual or potential, the most basic form of this being time sequence. Examples of relations incorporated under the heading of logical sequence include condition-consequence, instrument-achievement and cause-consequence. Matching relations are those where statements are "matched" against each other in terms of the degrees of identicality of relations. However there is no space to illustrate these here. Interested readers may look up the works cited in the references for more information.

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