

Summarising

What is the strategy of summarising?

Summarising is relating the most important points in a text (or a portion of a text) in our own words. In fiction we consider the basic story elements – main characters, setting, plot and sometimes theme in a summary. In nonfiction we pull together the most important information about a topic in a coherent way.

Why do we teach children to summarise?

Proficient readers summarise both during and after reading. During reading, we summarise to be sure we've "got it" before we continue. We may do this subconsciously in easy text, but when the text gets more complicated, we often need to step back and summarize to check our understanding. Where there are gaps, we know we have to use other strategies or other resources to address them.

After reading, we summarise for various authentic purposes. When we want to recommend a book to a friend, we summarise to explain what the book is about (without giving away the ending). When we do research on nonfiction topics, we summarise to capture what we want to remember from each source or portion of a source we use. Then we summarise what is important to learn from our work. And when we don't want to bore our teachers, friends and family with never-ending renditions of what we've read, seen, or done, we need to know how to summarise!

How do we teach children to summarise?

Teaching young children to summarise is challenging. Summarising requires focusing on what is important, and as noted in the Determining Importance section, children often think everything is equally important. Because retelling is also important, and is often used to measure comprehension of young children's oral reading, children may get much more instruction and practice in retelling than in summarising. On the other hand, we can ruin students' enjoyment of and motivation to read if we constantly require that they summarise after they finish.

We can, however, lay a strong foundation in the primary grades for summarising. Most importantly is to embed our instruction in the authentic purposes for summarising, both during and after reading, so summarising isn't just an assignment, but helps children process their reading. We use the Gradual Release of Responsibility to provide support for them. We model how summarising helps us to understand what we read, and we guide them to do the same.

Some instructional techniques for teaching summarising in the primary grades are shown in the chart below.

	Fiction	Nonfiction
During Reading	Model stopping at three places in the story to sum up what is important, using the traditional beginning, middle, and end graphic organiser. Students draw a picture to represent what is happening in each part of the story as it is read (aloud or independently). They can also add words or sentences as they are able.	Model noting what is important to remember by stopping at a few places in the text. Students stop and jot down on sticky notes what they think is most important in each part of a text as it is read (aloud or independently). Jigsaw pages of the text (by groups or individual children), with each group or child deciding what's important in their part of the text.
After Reading	Students assemble their pictures in the graphic organiser and share their summaries orally (or in writing). Teach students to create book reviews, bulletin boards, blogs, or other ways to recommend books to others. They summarise in order to tell their readers what the book is about, and then synthesise to include their own evaluation or interpretation of the text.	Each group or child contributes what is important to add to the summary from their part of the text.

Synthesising

What is the strategy of synthesising?

The prefix “syn” means together. When we synthesize, we pull together the most important points from our reading, but we move beyond what’s stated by the author. We focus on the insights that we gained from reading. We notice how our thinking changes as we read, so that when we finish, we can put our thinking and learning together in new ways. Debbie Miller says synthesising is “the process through which readers bring together their background knowledge and their evolving understanding of the book to create a complete and original understanding of the text.” (Reading with Meaning, p. 171).

We not only synthesise within a text, but across texts, especially when we are doing research or inquiry. We take what we learn from various sources and put it together in original ways.

Why do we teach children to synthesise?

We want our students to do more than parrot back what they’ve read. We want them to grow and change because of what they discover in texts. To do that, they need to synthesise. We have seen examples of children synthesising throughout this Reading Comprehension module, even though they had not yet been formally introduced to the strategy:

- When first graders found answers to their questions about animals by combining information from more than one paragraph or page of text, they were synthesising – taking ideas from different places and putting them together for their own purposes. (Ask Questions)
- When a second grader created a diagram of the stages of a volcano (see photo), she was synthesising information she had learned throughout the text. (Build and Activate Schema)
- When her classmate came up with the analogy that the magma chamber is like the heart of the volcano, he synthesised how the chamber looked and what he knew about its function to create a new way to think about magma. (Build and Activate Schema)

Children who have been taught strategic thinking synthesise on their own initiative because they have internalised the most important part of comprehension: to combine their thinking with the content on the page in order to understand. They know the importance of their own thinking.

How do we teach children to synthesise?

In fiction, Debbie Miller recommends teaching children that synthesis is like the ripples made by throwing a stone in a pond. First there is the small circle, our initial thinking. As we read, our thinking expands, like the ripples that grow bigger. Our final thoughts are the big ideas that we reach by the end of our reading. (Reading with Meaning, p. 173). So as we read aloud to children, we model what we are thinking at the beginning, and how our thinking changes through the story. We use the language, “At first I thought...Then I read...Now I’m thinking...” The Sample Lesson for this section, “Synthesise Our Thinking in Fiction,” is derived from Debbie Miller’s approach.

In informational text, synthesis is often the culmination of research or inquiry. When we study a topic through multiple texts – books, articles, multimedia resources, and hands-on experiences – we want to synthesise what we’ve learned. As noted above, “syn” means “together,” and these projects can be collaborative ones as well as individual. As children create murals, posters, or presentations to share their learning with authentic audiences, we teach them to express the big ideas about their topics in ways that are distinctly their own. For example, second graders in Ms. Whitman’s class created a quilt as the culmination of their study of the Underground Railroad. Each child’s individual square synthesizes what he or she found meaningful; together the quilt captures the overall spirit of the Underground Railroad.