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# Can Middle School Students Summarize?

**Andrea Giese Maxworthy  
Arlene Barry**

A large portion of students' time in the middle school is spent reading textbooks to acquire information. According to Adams, Carnine, and Gersten (1982):

*Beginning in intermediate grades and continuing through high school and college, a large part of students' time is spent in reading textbooks to acquire information. The process by which students learn information from textbooks is commonly referred to as study skills (p. 29).*

One frequently needed study skill is summarization. Summarizing text information is a valuable study activity which helps students understand and remember important ideas. In order to summarize, students must reduce the text to its main points. This requires an ability to analyze text structure and discard inessential information (Vacca and Vacca, 1989).

Six basic rules for summarizing text developed by Brown and Day (1983) are suggested in Richardson and Morgan (1990): 1) delete all unnecessary materials; 2) delete redundancies; 3) substitute a term for a list of items; 4) use a superordinate term for a list of actions; 5) select topic sentences from ones provided in the text; 6) construct

topic sentences when not provided explicitly in the text (p. 331).

The complex task of summarization is difficult for middle school students. According to Irvin (1990): "High school students are more able than middle grade students to produce summaries that contain main ideas." The older or more skilled reader is a better summarizer. Unskilled readers tend to retell rather than condense information and often include concrete details. Skilled readers are able to create their own topic sentence to reflect the main idea when it is not stated in the text (Vacca and Vacca, 1989).

The authors used the opportunity provided by a Saturday enrichment program designed to teach study skills to investigate the ability of middle school readers to summarize and learn from text. The participants in this research project were seventh, eighth and ninth graders enrolled in a six week workshop held on a university campus for which a tuition fee was charged. As teachers of this workshop, the authors sought to assess and develop students' abilities to summarize text. Although students' attendance and participation in the project identified them as motivated and cooperative, no information about their reading abilities was available. Students were asked to summarize the important points from a paragraph in a history text, *Land of Promise* (Berkin and Wood, 1987). This section of the text entitled "Mass Production and Immigration," compares the world of work before and after the Civil War. Important concepts discussed in this section were division of labor, mass production, old immigrants, new immigrants, nativism, contract labor, and the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The specific paragraph students summarized described the manufacture of shoes before the Civil War:

*Let us go back to our pre-Civil War shoes factory, but this time to see things from a different point of view. Imagine that you are a shoemaker, or "cordwainer," as the trade was called then. Most likely you live in that small town we described earlier with several other cordwainers. In the shop, too, are one or two young apprentices who are learning the trade by working under your direction. As a skilled shoemaker, you know every aspect of making a shoe, for you, too, once studied the craft as an apprentice. Each person in the shop creates his or her own product from start to finish, beginning with cutting out the leather pattern and ending with sewing on the soles. In the course of the day, you might stop for a moment to take in the view from the window by your workbench, or pause to sip a drink for refreshment. The time it takes you to make a pair of shoes and the way you work depends on your skill. You have a day-to-day relationship with your employer, and when problems or grievances come up, you and your employer settle them directly (p. 443).*

The course instructors found the paragraph to be very clearly written and expected students to have no trouble with their summaries. However, this was not the case and students exhibited a variety of difficulties writing summaries. Five trends were noted. 1) Only 41% of the students were able to produce the unstated topic sentence of the paragraph. The following summary was a typical response of students: *First, it tells you to imagine that you're a shoemaker. You'd be called a "cordwainer" who lived in a small town and worked in a shop. You have an apprentice or two to teach. You're a skill[ed] shoemaker and create your own shoes from start to finish. You may stop for a moment during the day. Depending on your skill you may finish late or early. If there is a problem you settle it directly.* An ability to produce an unstated topic sentence was cited as necessary by Brown and Day (1983) for writing a summary. 2) Students exhibited difficulty choosing the most important

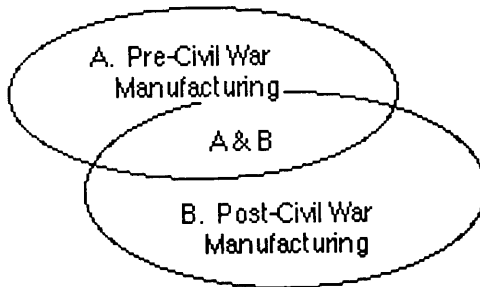
information in the article. Taylor (1986) explains that students may remember and focus on details because of the high imagery value contained in details. The following examples show this tendency: *A shoemaker in the Civil War lives in a small town usually has two apprentices trying to learn the trade. You don't take many brakes you work the whole day and maybe take a refreshment brake. If something is wrong they take care of it right away.* 3) A good summary should delete important information. Information was copied almost verbatim. The following example could more accurately be described as paraphrasing: *"Cordweiners" were most likely to live in a small town, and work with other "cordweiners" in a workshop.* 4) Students did not possess the background knowledge needed to write accurate summaries about pre-Civil War occupations. Instead of talking about "shoemakers," "apprentices" and "cordwainers," students discussed "shoestores," "craftshops" and "shoe repair shops" as in the following example: *This paragraph is about what the atmosphere would be like in a shoe store in the 1800s. About the people who worked there and what they did.* 5) Students were not able to substitute a superordinate for a list of items or actions (e.g., the superordinate "pets" would be used in place of cats, dogs, turtles, lizards, birds, etc.) In the following example the individual steps of shoe construction are listed: *Manufacturing before the Civil War. This paragraph is about the life of 2 shoemaker. They also could be called cordwainer. They lived in a small town and worked in a workshop. One or two apprentices would be there learning the trade. Each person does his own project from start to finish. They start with cutting out the leather pattern, and ending with sewing the soles together. They do take a look out the window and eat lunch. They had a day-to-day relationships with your employer, so when they have problems you settle them directly.*

These experiences verified those of others who concluded that middle school students are generally not skilled in summarizing textbook selections (Brown and Day, 1983) or in comprehending textbook material (Bauman, 1983; Taylor, et al., 1985). This is an issue of great concern because middle school students spend much of their day learning from textbooks.

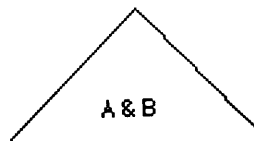
However, the difficulties exhibited by these students, and those of other students described in the literature, have provided educators with the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and adjust instructional procedures accordingly. Based on what has been learned from this action research, the following recommendations are given: 1) Teach study strategies in the content area classroom. This allows students to practice with the materials they must learn. 2) Provide students with the background knowledge appropriate to the reading selection. Demonstrations, field trips, movies, filmstrips and other activities are helpful for giving students a picture of the time and place being discussed. Students in the midwest might visit Old World Wisconsin, a "living history" museum developed by the Wisconsin State Historical Society just outside of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In a replicated village, students could actually enter an 1800's shoe shop and watch the tedious process of making shoes by hand. They would be allowed to try their own hand at forming shoe leather onto a last and stitching with hog bristles. This arduous procedure could then be compared to the mass production of shoes with a visit to the Freeman Shoe Factory in Beloit, Wisconsin. 3) Focus student attention on a limited number of new concepts. Many content textbooks cover an extensive array of new concepts in a few pages. For example, the authors of the social studies textbooks in this study covered the very broad topics of manufacturing and immigration before and after the Civil

War. The teacher needed to focus on a smaller amount of information and allow for a more thorough analysis of the information. This procedure would have made the complex information less confusing for students. 4) Help students select and organize key ideas into meaningful structure. Students need to see how all the important facts fit together to make the big picture. The information on manufacturing before and after the Civil War would have fit well into a compare-contrast format. Either of the following diagrams could have been used to allow students to visualize the similarities and differences between the two eras of manufacturing (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Alternative diagrams to encouraging visualization**  
**of compare/contrast text**



Pre-Civil War  
 Manufacturing  
 A.



Post-Civil War  
 Manufacturing  
 B.

5) Model the study strategy deemed most useful. Teachers should think out loud as they proceed through a strategy. If students see and hear exactly how an expert extracts and organizes important information, the study process will not be a mystery. 6) Provide repeated guided practice with the study strategies taught. Taylor (1986) found that her middle school students needed five or six sessions of practice on writing hierarchical summaries before they could confidently write their own summaries. Palincsar (1984) provided 15 sessions of practice for her students before they could use a reciprocal teaching strategy independently. Days and even weeks of guided practice may be needed before students internalize specific study strategies.

Directing middle school students to read a chapter and complete end-of-chapter activities is ineffective. The authors of this article found that middle school students could not easily read a text selection and summarize the important information. Continuous and specific teacher guidance is essential. It is recommended that teachers teach study strategies in context, provide appropriate background knowledge, focus on a limited number of new concepts, select and organize key ideas into meaningful structures, model effective study strategies, and provide repeated guided practice with the strategies taught. Continuous and specific teacher guidance is essential in order to teach study skills to able learners.

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