

SUMMARY SKILLS

Introduction

Summary work involves picking out the essence of a piece of writing, or a speech, or a meeting, or a broadcast, and re-expressing it in continuous sentences or notes. It is also called *précis*. It can take a variety of forms.

The traditional examination summary exercise, which involves rewriting a passage in about a third of its length, is the most detailed. Nowadays, examiners tend to set the exercise more in terms of journalistic practice, and it can take quite a wide variety of forms. The opposite extreme from the traditional one-third, full-sentence reduction would be the very highly condensed notes which a minuting secretary would take from a meeting. This would be difficult to set as an exercise in examination conditions, but condensed note-form exercises are becoming a feature of advanced exercises in summary skills. If continuous sentences are called for, and the whole passage is to be summarised, the required reduction could involve anything up to a tenth of the length of the original, or possibly even less.

In addition, the exercise may call for subtler forms of selection. It may require summary of some particular aspect of the set passage, whilst the rest is to be ignored. For example, the question may ask for only facts to be summarised, and the writer's opinions to be left out, or vice versa. Or it may require summary only of the essential arguments, and exclusion of all illustrative detail. Alternatively, summary may be required only of certain ideas or themes in the passage.

Questions might also be set requiring comparative value judgements of the passage and your summary of it, in terms of style and effectiveness of communication.

Summary technique: general

Whatever form the summary exercise takes, certain basic techniques need to be applied, and we will consider these first, before looking in more detail at approaches to different types of summary question.

The first stage in any summary work is to achieve as full an understanding as possible of the passage to be summarised. This will probably mean reading it through two or three times before even picking up your pen. On your initial reading, the sense of much of the passage may well be obscured by the presence of difficult words. You should learn not to be thrown into a state of panic by this! It will be possible after a couple more readings, to understand what the writer is saying, without necessarily knowing what is meant by every word he or she uses.

On second reading you should be looking for the theme of the passage as a whole. Until you have worked this out, you cannot hope to begin your summary. Once you are sure of the theme, after your second or third reading, you should think of it constantly while you are working at the separate thoughts contained in the passage.

The next stage — that of working out a first draft — can be tackled in various ways. The simplest is to read through the passage once more, this time underlining sentences and phrases which you feel to be important to the arguments or theme, and then begin writing a draft in continuous sentences, without making notes, and with the word limit in mind. Unless you are very lucky, of course, your first draft will require some pruning or expanding before you write it out again as a final draft. Some people advocate deliberately keeping your first draft short, and building it up to the word limit in the second, whilst others favour the inclusion of everything of major or minor relevance in the first draft, and cutting down in the second. It is purely a matter of personal preference. A more time-consuming general approach is to make full notes of the points to be included, before writing them out in sentences. You will discover soon enough whether you can manage to complete a set of notes and two drafts within the time limit, and which general technique suits you better. The second draft should be your perfected answer in the number of words stipulated (or as near as you can possibly manage).

One further general point needs to be made before analysing specific summary techniques. It is absolutely essential to tackle the passage in terms of ideas rather than sentences. If you attempt to summarise the passage sentence by sentence you are certain to end up with an incoherent and inaccurate answer. You must try to work out each idea and its relevance in terms of the overall line of argument of the passage, and only on that basis will you succeed.

Summaries of complete passages

Let us look at a short passage for summary, and consider approaches to two different kinds of questions set on it. The theme of the passage is the value of summary writing (!). It contains 373 words.

What price précis?

The art of writing a concise, well-balanced, comprehensive and accurate summary demands clarity both of thought and of written expression. It is not a question of reflecting on a writer's ideas in the light of one's own, nor of interpreting those ideas; it is, instead, a question of reproducing the ideas with precision, and in

5 summary form. It is an exercise in condensation. There can be little doubt, however, that many students, on undertaking a summary exercise, will wonder why they are expected to fritter away their time on a task which seems frustratingly tedious and futile; they will ask themselves, with a sigh, 'What is the point of slavishly rewriting what someone else has already said, when I could be producing something original?' It must seem to many like sitting in front of a portrait by Rembrandt or Van Gogh, and being asked to copy it in outline form, without colour, light and shade, or atmosphere, when their artistic instinct demands that they be allowed to draw on the master's work as the inspiration for an original creation. They are apt to consider the whole business stultifying, the very antithesis of creativity. And in one sense their criticism is valid: by summarising a writer's work one is taking away much of its essence, draining it of its colour, its tone, its subtlety, its imaginative vitality. It is rather like describing a 'cordon bleu' meal by mentioning only the ingredients.

Yet in another sense the criticism is profoundly unfair. There are many aspects to the study of English language in addition to creative writing. And summary writing is by no means irrelevant to the demands of 'real life'. In business, in fact in all walks of professional life, it is frequently necessary to summarise factual information and the arguments presented by others: indeed, we are constantly engaged in verbal summary of television programmes, film plots, conversations and comical incidents in the normal course of our daily lives. The conciseness and precision of expression which comes with summary practice is thus of no small value both as a necessary attribute of articulate men and women in its own right, and as a skill which is of practical value in work and in life.

These are the questions:

- i. Write a summary of the passage in continuous sentences, using no more than 125 words.
- ii. Summarise the main points of the passage in not more than 40 words of continuous prose.

Here is a specimen answer to question i.:

Effective summary requires clear thinking and writing, involving accurate summary of another's ideas. Almost certainly, however, many students find the exercise monotonous, and question the value of mere reproduction rather than originality, comparing it to the sterile task of copying an old master's painting in outline. The criticism is partially valid, since a summary destroys much of the flavour and artistry of the original. In another way, however, it is unjust. English language involves more than merely creative writing, and summary has relevance to life. In all professions summary is often a necessary requirement, and in normal life we constantly summarise things seen and heard. Summary practice develops brevity and clarity of expression, and is therefore extremely useful in enhancing conversational and professional skills.

(124 words)

And now a specimen answer to question ii.:

Summary writing is an exercise in condensation. Many students consider it pointless and uncreative, and summarising a passage certainly destroys its imaginative essence. Yet both professional and daily life necessitate summary; good technique is therefore of practical and personal value.

(40 words)

Now let us look at both of the questions and answers in terms of summary technique.

A couple of readings should establish the theme of the passage to be the drawbacks and virtues of learning summary skills. Having established that, we can begin working on the passage, selecting ideas which are essential to the argument, and discarding those which are unimportant.

Question i, however, allows us to use a third of the words in the original passage, whereas question ii necessitates discarding nearly nine-tenths. The technique involved is inevitably very different.

The difference, essentially, is that in the case of a roughly one-third summary, the argument needs to be presented in detail, whereas in a one-tenth summary only the bare bones can be presented.

If we take the passage and the answers section by section, we can observe the differences in technique.

The passage begins with an explanation of what summary writing involves (lines 1 to 5). The absolute essence of this section is the definition of summary in line 5: 'It is an exercise in condensation'. In the answer to question ii, this is all that is retained from the first five lines of the passage, and the word 'condensation' is kept. In a very abbreviated

summary exercise, *selecting the right details* is what counts; it is less important to worry about choosing your own words. In the answer to question i, however, the opening sentence is also summarised, since this is an important statement about the precise nature of effective summary writing, a subtlety which is not allowed for in question ii. It should be noted that this opening sentence of the passage contains lists of adjectives and nouns. In detailed summary exercises, lists such as these pose problems. The best solution, in most cases, is to find a generalisation which covers all the items in the list, rather than selecting words or phrases from the list, which limits the meaning of the original. In the answer to question i the adjective 'effective' is used to cover the list of adjectives in line 1.

Even in the answer to question i, the first part of the second sentence is ignored: it is a negative statement, which is followed by a positive restatement of the same idea. In any summary exercise, negative statements need to be turned into positive statements (or left out if they add nothing of significance to the meaning). In the passage, this idea is then restated in different words; mere repetition should also always be ignored in any summary exercise. Note that the opening three sentences in the passage have been summarised in the answer to question i in a single sentence, the ideas being linked together with a participle ('involving'). This is good technique, giving continuity and fluency to your writing, and avoiding sequences of short sentences. You will be marked partly for the style and coherence of your answer, so this is important.

The next section of the passage concerns students' responses to the task of summary writing (lines 5-15). In question ii we are looking only for the essence of the students' complaints, which boil down to futility and uncreativity. For question i, the word limit allows for more precision as to the nature of the complaints, and it will be noted that the specimen answer mentions the comparison with the copying of 'an old master's painting'. As a general rule, comparisons, illustrations and examples can be left out in any summary, but in this case the idea of copying a painting in outline, without colour etc., leads on directly to the idea which follows (in lines 15-18) of destroying the colour etc., of a piece of writing by summarising it. In an exercise in which you are allowed to use as many as a third of the words in the original passage, if an illustration or example actually forms a link in the argument, rather than being there merely to reinforce a point already made, then it is worth considering whether it should be included. It is worth noting that both specimen answers use the phrase 'many students'. This is a direct lift from the passage (line 6). Even when you have a comparatively generous word allowance, there is no need to worry about altering every word of the original: the copying of words and even short phrases will not be penalised if there is no obvious alternative which does not either distort the meaning of, or involve the use of more words than the original, which is the case here. It would be tempting, especially in answering question ii, to abbreviate this phrase simply to 'students'. However, this would give the impression that all students dislike summary work, which gives a distorted impression of what the passage is saying. You must be on your guard constantly against changing the meaning of the passage, however slightly, for the sake of brevity. Lines 8-10 consist of an imaginary quoted question. In neither answer is quotation or question form used. If the idea contained in a quotation or question is important enough to be included in your answer, then it should be written in reported speech and statement form, as in the specimen answer to question i.

The third section (lines 15-18) considers the way in which students' criticisms of summary exercises are valid. In both answers, this time, the comparison (lines 17 and 18) is ignored, since it falls into the category of mere reinforcement. It should be noted that in the answers to question ii the essential point is made by quoting key words from the passage, whereas in the case of question i a slightly more precise generalisation is used.

In the final section (lines 19-29), which presents arguments in favour of the learning of summary technique, three sets of lists are to be found in a single sentence (in lines 21-6). These are all dealt with by varieties of generalisation in the answer to question i; broader generalisations are used in the answer to question ii to cover the whole paragraph in a single sentence.

A further point will have emerged from this analysis: the ideas should generally be summarised in the order in which they appear in the passage. It should be borne in mind also, however, that in writing a summary you, too, are presenting a coherent statement, and it is equally important to ensure that you connect your points together in a logical manner.

Style comparison questions

If you are asked to compare your answer with the set passage in terms of style and effectiveness of communication, there are certain points to make which will be of general application.

The most obvious one is that your piece of writing will inevitably be dry, and lacking in individuality, compared with the original. To create interest in what he or she has to say, a writer will almost always include examples, illustrations and comparisons, or historical and other details, or quotations or references. He or she will also shape the piece, and attempt to infuse it with vitality. When your sole concern is abbreviation, all of this has to go.

The way to answer a question calling for stylistic comparison, therefore, is to briefly *quote* examples of the features of the original which are missing in your summary, and attempt to explain what is lost by missing them out.

Summary of summary techniques

- 1 Use your own words as far as possible, but try to ensure that you retain the *exact meaning* of the original.
- 2 Keep, as far as possible, to the arrangement of ideas of the original passage.

- 3 Include only the points made in the passage; do not introduce any ideas of your own.
- 4 Leave out negative statements, or make them positive.
- 5 Do not write questions, but turn them into statements if they are relevant.
- 6 Do not include spoken words or quotations, but report the idea contained in them if it is relevant.
- 7 Do not include repetitions of ideas or phrases, and be as concise as possible in your wording.
- 8 Leave out examples, comparisons and details if they merely illustrate a point which is being made and do not contribute anything new to the main argument of the passage.
- 9 Try to find generalisations for the ideas contained in lists of words and phrases.
- 10 Use linking words and constructions, such as 'nevertheless', 'consequently', 'despite', 'because', 'although', 'however', 'therefore', 'thus', 'since', and participles ('-ing' verbs), to provide balance and continuity.

Additional points

There are a few more details which are worth mentioning:

- 1 You are quite likely to be asked to count the number of words you have used, and to record the total. Don't forget to do this, and try to be accurate. If your passage looks as if it might be longer than you have indicated, the examiner will certainly count the words him or herself. You can probably afford to be up to ten words over the allowed maximum without losing more than a couple of marks, but if you are only two or three words over, it should be easy enough to save a mark by simple techniques like combining sentences with the use of a participle. If you are many words under the limit, on the other hand, the chances are that you have missed some relevant points, and you should expand your summary.
- 2 If you are asked to supply a title for the passage, try to keep it short (no more than ten words at most) and think of a phrase which represents an encapsulation of the theme of the passage as a whole. You are not expected to include the title in your final word count.
- 3 There is no point in wasting words by using reported speech, with phrases like 'the writer said/says that...'. Simply summarise what is said without any kind of introduction.
- 4 It is generally considered appropriate for the summary to be written as a single paragraph, but if you split it into separate paragraphs at suitable points, it is extremely unlikely to be held against you. It is probably best not to follow the paragraphing of the original passage in your summary, since this is likely to result in some extremely short paragraphs.
- 5 It is best not to use abbreviations of any sort, except in a note-making exercise, since a summary is a piece of formal prose, and abbreviations are a rather unfair short-cut to word saving.
- 6 When your summary is complete, you should check carefully for spelling and punctuation errors, since marks will be allocated for technical accuracy.