

Research Based Strategies for the Classroom

Part # 3

Summarizing and Note Taking

Introduction

Effective summarizing leads to an increase in student learning. Helping students recognize how information is structured will help them summarize what they read or hear. For example, summarizing of a reading assignment can be more effective when done within summary frames, which typically include a series of questions the teacher provides to direct student attention to specific content (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Students who can effectively summarize learn to synthesize information, a higher-order thinking skill which includes analyzing information, identifying key concepts, and defining extraneous information.

Note taking is a related strategy that teachers use to support student learning. Without explicit instruction in note taking, however, many students simply write down words or phrases word for word, without analysis (or good effect). Successful note-takers summarize to arrive at a nugget of meaning, which they are much more likely to retain. Students also benefit from using their notes as a document of their learning. Teachers can prompt students to review and refine their notes, particularly when it is time to prepare for an exam, write a research paper, or other summative assessment of learning.

Key Research Findings

- Students have to analyze information at a deep level in order to decide what information to delete, what to substitute, and what to keep when they are asked to give a summary (Anderson, V., & Hidi, 1988/1989; Hidi & Anderson, 1987).
- Reading comprehension increases when students learn how to incorporate "summary frames" as a tool for summarizing (Meyer & Freedle, 1984). Summary frames are a series of questions created by the teacher and designed to highlight critical passages of text. When students use this strategy, they are better able to understand what they are reading, identify key information, and provide a summary that helps them retain the information (Armbruster, Anderson, & Ostertag, 1987).

- Teacher-prepared notes show students what is important and how ideas relate, and offer a model for how students should take notes themselves (Marzano et al., 2001).
- Notes should be in both linguistic and nonlinguistic forms, including idea webs, sketches, informal outlines, and combinations of words and schematics; and, the more notes, the better (Nye, Crooks, Powlie, & Tripp, 1984).
- When students review and revise their own notes, the notes become more meaningful and useful (Anderson & Armbruster, 1986; Denner, 1986; Einstein, Morris, & Smith, 1985).

Implementation

By deliberately teaching the skills of summarizing and note taking, teachers provide students with a stronger foundation for learning by employing research-based strategies such as:

- 1. Teach a formal process.** Teach students the delete-substitute-keep process for summarizing. A "rule-based strategy" for summarizing includes a specific set of steps (Brown, Campione, & Day, 1981).
- 2. Delete unnecessary words or sentences**
- 3. Delete redundant words or sentences**
- 4. Substitute super-ordinate terms** (for example, "trees" for pines, oaks, and maples)
- 5. Select or create a topic sentence**

What information can they delete because it is not essential or redundant? When they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary or specific examples of more general concepts, can they substitute another term that will help them remember the big ideas? What information is essential to keep?

- 1. Identify explicit structure.** Help students identify how information is structured in different formats. For example, when they begin reading a play, make sure they understand the difference between scene descriptions, stage directions, and dialog. Use a newspaper to show them how news and opinion writing is structured differently. Examine a Web site together to make sure they understand which content is paid advertising.
- 2. Model good note taking.** Model for your students how to take effective notes. Give them an outline of information you are going to cover in class, and have them use that as the starting point for their own notes. Show them that notes are living documents that change and evolve as the note-taker gains new understanding.
- 3. Frame summaries.** Use framing questions to focus their attention on key concepts you want them to remember. To encourage students to synthesize ideas, give them a word limitation for summarizing information concisely.
- 4. Personalize.** Encourage students to personalize their notes, using sketches, diagrams, color codes, idea webs, or other approaches that make sense to them. What matters most is that students make notes that are meaningful and useful to them.

5. Use notes as study aids. Have students compare and discuss their notes in small groups as a method for review and test preparation.

Additional Resources

The Virginia Tech Division of Student Affairs provides a list of note-taking skills.

<http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/notetake.html>

The Academic Resource Center at Sweet Briar College also provides note-taking suggestions.

<http://www.arc.sbc.edu/notes.html>

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