

## WRITING SUMMARY

### TECHNIQUES FOR SUMMARIZING A PARAGRAPH/ PASSAGE

By studying features of summary documents, we can see that they involve mainly two skills: reading and writing. Thence, we can make these following steps to summarize a passage:

#### 1. Reading the paragraph for the first time

Students read through the whole passage, however, they do not underline or mark any information. This aims to help students grasp general ideas and purposes of the passage without being distracted by small details. Take notice of the author's purposes, for example, whether he is trying to convince, prove or criticize some problems or not; his writing voice is positive, negative or neutral. Understanding the intention and attitude of the author can help students convey the writing more candidly.

A sample of an original text:

#### **“The Northern Lights”**

There are times when the night sky glows with bands of color. The bands may begin as cloud shapes and then spread into a great arc across the entire sky. They may fall in folds like a curtain drawn across the heavens. The lights usually grow brighter, then suddenly dim. During this time the sky glows with pale yellow, pink, green, violet, blue, and red. These lights are called the Aurora Borealis. Some people call them the Northern Lights. Scientists have been watching them for hundreds of years. They are not quite sure what causes them. In ancient times people were afraid of the Lights. They imagined that they saw fiery dragons in the sky. Some even concluded that the heavens were on fire.

*(Source: Long Beach City College WRSC)*

When skimming the passage, we can see its main idea is describing bands of color, which occasionally appear in the sky. The passage's aim is to describe a phenomenon and the author's writing voice is neutral.

#### 2. Reading the paragraph for the second time

Students read the passage again. For this time, read carefully and find the topic sentence. Topic sentence can lie in the first, the last or even the middle part of the paragraph, however, it is often in the first part. Afterwards, students find and underline, or write the paragraph's supporting ideas in their draft. This part requires students to have great reading skills as well as grasp a paragraph's structure, therefore they can easily find out main ideas without making any mistake with unimportant information. Depending on its length, a paragraph often has from three to five main ideas.

For example:

#### **“The Northern Lights”**

*(Topic sentence)* There are times when the night sky glows with bands of color. The bands may begin as cloud shapes and then spread into a great arc across the entire sky. They may fall

in folds like a curtain drawn across the heavens. The lights usually grow brighter, then suddenly dim. During this time the sky glows with pale yellow, pink, green, violet, blue, and red. (1)These lights are called the Aurora Borealis. Some people call them the Northern Lights. (2)Scientists have been watching them for hundreds of years. They are not quite sure what causes them. (3)In ancient times people were afraid of the Lights. They imagined that they saw fiery dragons in the sky. Some even concluded that the heavens were on fire.

In the above paragraph, students can figure out that the topic sentence is the first one and the three main ideas were numbered 1, 2, 3. In their draft, students can make a list of ideas like the following one:

- + Topic sentence: There are times when the night sky glows with bands of color.
- Supporting idea 1: these lights called Aurora Borealis/ Northern Lights
- Supporting idea 2: scientists not quite sure what causes them
- Supporting idea 3: ancient people saw fiery dragons/ heavens on fire

### **3. Omitting insignificant information**

In this stage, students can use red pens to cross the insignificant information that there should not be in the summary, because a summary should only indicate main information but not all details. Students, therefore, should be able to know how to deal with this kind of information. To illustrate, the dates such as "*the first-time visitor to the Greek isles will see sparkling aquamarine seas, craggy hills and beaches of every possible color.*" or the characteristics such as "*73 percent of Americans in a blind taste test preferred brand X peanut butter.*" are of this kind of information.

In a paragraph, the writer sometimes repeat a piece of information but in other words in order to emphasize the information. However, the repeated information should be eliminated.

Let's take the paragraph of "The Northern Lights" as an example. All the information of colors, shapes or characteristics... in the paragraph can be omitted.

#### **"The Northern Lights"**

There are times when the night sky glows with bands of color. *The bands may begin as cloud shapes and then spread into a great arc across the entire sky. They may fall in folds like a curtain drawn across the heavens. The lights usually grow brighter, then suddenly dim. During this time the sky glows with pale yellow, pink, green, violet, blue, and red.* These lights are called the Aurora Borealis. Some people call them the Northern Lights. Scientists have been *watching them for hundreds of years.* They are not quite sure what causes them. In ancient times people were afraid of the Lights. They imagined that they saw fiery dragons in the sky. Some even concluded that the heavens were on fire.

*(Source: Long Beach City College WRSC)*

## 4. Making an outline

Students make a list or an outline about the topic sentence and main ideas that are necessary in the summary. In this step, students need to focus on assignment's requirements for the length of the summary. For example, for a 150-word paragraph, if students are required to summarize it within 50 words, the length of the given extract will be shortened to one-third. This will be just long enough for students to convey the theme and main ideas of the paragraph. However, if the assignment requires to summarize the given extract in 80 words, its length will be cut in half. All in all, to each main idea, we can write one sentence summarizing the illustration and explanation for itself in the paragraph. To fulfill this, students need to have good information assembling skills.

## 5. Writing

### 5.1. Writing the topic sentence

First of all, students need to write the topic sentence. To write it, they should express the same idea of the topic sentence in the original paragraph, however, in a more general way. For example:

#### Example 1:

##### **Original document:**

I am a Taiwanese man, but I have lived in Canada for several years now. I am surprised at how Canadian society respects the rights of women, both at work and home. Personally I believe women in Canada are better off than women in Taiwan. However, some of my female friends in Canada miss the good old days when women were treated in a different ways. You see, in the past, gentlemen followed different rules of behavior. They would open the doors for ladies, pull out chairs for ladies to sit down, stand up when a lady left the table, and offer to pay the bill at restaurants. Now, however, most Canadian believe that men and women should be considered equal. For example, women now generally have to pay for their own meals.

##### *Summary:*

This text describes the experience of a Taiwanese man who has lived in Canada for several years. He considers Canadian women better off than Taiwanese. However, he notes some Canadian women feel nostalgic about the days when they received special courtesies. For example, formerly men opened doors for women or paid for their meals. At this time, most Canadians endeavor to treat men and women equally. Women today therefore are expected to cover the cost of their own meals.

*(Source: Ming Chuan University PE5 Examination, Autumn 2000 Day Version)*

#### Example 2:

##### **Original document:**

**“The Northern Lights”**

There are times when the night sky glows with bands of color. The bands may begin as cloud shapes and then spread into a great arc across the entire sky. They may fall in folds like a curtain drawn across the heavens. The lights usually grow brighter, then suddenly dim. During this time the sky glows with pale yellow, pink, green, violet, blue, and red. These lights are called the Aurora Borealis. Some people call them the Northern Lights. Scientists have been watching them for hundreds of years. They are not quite sure what causes them. In ancient times people were afraid of the Lights. They imagined that they saw fiery dragons in the sky. Some even concluded that the heavens were on fire.

**Summary :**

The Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights, are bands of color in the night sky. Ancient people thought that these lights were dragon on fire, and even modern scientists are not sure what they are.

In the two above examples, we can see the topic sentences of the summaries are more general as opposed to the original paragraph.

### **5.2. Supplying main ideas**

As mentioned in part II.4, depending on the requirement for the summary's length, students can express each main idea in the original document by one or two sentences. These sentences had better change illustrating examples, statistics or detailed description into more general sentences.

Example:

1. Original document: *"the first-time visitor to the Greek isles will see sparkling aquamarine seas, craggy hills and beaches of every possible color."*

Summary: *"The Greek islands are beautiful"*

2. Original document: *"73 percent of Americans in a blind taste test preferred brand X peanut butter."*

Summary: *"Most Americans prefer brand X peanut butter."*

### **5.3. Writing in one's own way**

Students should pay attention to how to express their own style of writing. It is not compulsory to change all the given words in the original text, but try to avoid repetition of words and expressions in the text given as this is considered being unable to comprehend the text, to use their own vocabulary and expressions. The common occurrence is that a bad summary often contains the copy of the words, sentences or expressions due to the poor vocabulary and sentence structures. All these would degrade the quality of the summary.

Below are some examples of summaries that are not qualified because too many words and phrases are copied.

**Original text**

I am a Taiwanese man, but I have lived in Canada for several years now. I am surprised at how Canadian society respects the rights of women, both at work and home. Personally I believe women in Canada are better off than women in Taiwan. However, some of my female friends in Canada miss the good old days when women were treated in a different ways. You see, in the past, gentlemen followed different rules of behavior. They would open the doors for ladies, pull out chairs for ladies to sit down, stand up when a lady left the table, and offer to pay the bill at restaurants. Now, however, most Canadian believe that men and women should be considered equal. For example, women now generally have to pay for their own meals.

*(Source: Ming Chuan University PE5 Examination, Autumn 2000 Day Version)*

### **Version 1: (Unqualified summary)**

I am a Taiwanese and am surprised at how Canadian society respects the rights of women. I believe women in Canada are better off than women in Taiwan. However, some Canada women miss the good old days when gentlemen followed different rules of behavior. They would open the doors for ladies, etc. Now most Canadian believe that men and women should be considered equal and women now generally have to pay for their own meals. [75 words. From a sample response to the Ming Chuan University PE5 Examination, Autumn 2000 Day Version].

### **Version 2: (Qualified summary)**

This text describes the experience of a Taiwanese man who has lived in Canada for several years. He considers Canadian women better off than Taiwanese. However, he notes some Canadian women feel nostalgic about the days when they received special courtesies. For example, formerly men opened doors for women or paid for their meals. At this time, most Canadians endeavor to treat men and women equally. Women today therefore are expected to cover the cost of their own meals. [78 words]

Though the number of words in the two versions are similar, the two versions are differently assessed. Compared to the original text, version 1 is almost a copy with less information so as to shorten the text; whereas, version 2 is well-done with good paraphrase. In details:

- *“Personally I believe women in Canada are better off than women in Taiwan”* ⇔ *“He considers Canadian women better off than Taiwanese”*

- *“miss the good old days”* ⇔ *“feel nostalgic”*

- *“most Canadian believe that men and women should be considered equal”* ⇔ *“most Canadians endeavor to treat men and women equally”*

- *“women now generally have to pay for their own meals”* ⇔ *“women today therefore are expected to cover the cost of their own meals”*

Thanks to the changes in words, phrases and expressions, version 2 is obviously successful. Apart from what has been mentioned above, in the summary, students should also use effectively appropriate connectors to make the content cohesive. Here are some common connectors and expressions:

- Opposite: however, but, nevertheless, in contrast, despite, conversely
- Comparison: similarly, likewise
- Cause - effect: because, since, so, consequently, therefore, as a result
- Example: for example, to illustration, for instance, in other words