

# **An evaluation of approaches to summary writing in EAP**

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## **Abstract**

Having established the value of summary writing in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), this article examines the coverage given to it, and suggested approaches, within contemporary EFL materials. It goes on to evaluate these approaches in terms of applicability to the author's own context, before considering an alternative approach from Johns (1988), proposed almost 30 years ago. It concludes that this latter approach, given no mention in more recent teaching materials, appears to offer solutions to the main shortcomings highlighted within these.

## **Introduction**

Summary writing is viewed as being an important skill within an English for academic purposes (EAP) context (see, for example, de Chazal, 2014; Edge, 1983; Jordan, 1997). De Chazal (2014) notes the value of summarising as a means of helping students process their understanding of texts, while both he and Gibbons (2002) posit it as a valuable tool in gauging the extent of this understanding. Whilst also noting the importance of summary writing, Johns (1988) highlights the inadequacy of instruction given to it within many English as a foreign language (EFL) materials. While this comment was made almost 30 years ago, a look at the coverage given to it within more recently produced textbooks reveals that the

situation may not have changed. This article will give a brief overview of such coverage within four English language writing textbooks, comparing the methods therein with other sources. An evaluation of these methods in terms of the author's own context for summary writing will be given, before it is suggested that Johns' (1988) proposal may be of more value. Finally, the extent to which Johns' (1988) comment regarding inadequacy of instruction in relation to summary writing still stands will be explored.

## **Context**

The context in which this author has been teaching summary writing has been with first and second-year classes of undergraduate students in a national university in Japan. The majority of the texts used for summary writing purposes in class have been sourced from online news websites and are not, therefore, written for use as language learning materials. However, they have generally only required editing for length rather than language. While much of the lexis and idiomatic language use does present a challenge for students, they have, on the whole, been able to grasp the overall meaning of texts. The transition from this stage to being able to extract and distil this meaning into a coherent well-structured summary, however, has proved more difficult.

With regard to summary writing, Edge (1983) highlights an issue many EFL students face, namely that the majority of work done with texts previous to this has required them to take a bottom-up approach, focusing on understanding grammar and lexis at sentence and paragraph level. In contrast, he argues, summary writing requires an overall understanding of a text, necessitating a more top-down approach. De Chazal (2014) makes similar claims, noting that lower level readers tend to take a bottom-up approach, "built up first at paragraph level, then at text level". Higher level readers, on the other hand, "adopt a more holistic 'top-down'... approach" (p.168). Accepting that this may be necessary, the following will examine the extent

to which a top-down approach might be nurtured in contemporary teaching materials relating to summary writing.

## **Overview of proposed summary writing methods**

In the first two textbooks, both focusing specifically on writing within EAP, summary writing is afforded little attention, but rather is combined with either instruction on writing notes (Rogers, 2011) or paraphrasing (Van Geyte, 2013). In the first of these, *Delta Academic Objectives: Writing Skills* (Rogers, 2011), summarising is defined as “mak[ing] a short statement giving only the main information and not the details” (Rogers, 2011, p.12). While no explicit instruction is provided on how to write a summary, from the handful of exercises, the implication appears to be that familiarity with the content of a text (of paragraph length) is followed by distilling the meaning into a single sentence. Another exercise asks learners to take notes on two given paragraphs and allow a week to elapse before using only the notes to “write a brief summary” (p.13). No indication of how to write this summary, or how brief it should be, is given. In the second, *Writing: Learn to Write Better Academic Essays* (Van Geyte, 2013), even less instruction is given, with summarizing simply defined as “similar to paraphrasing” where “you also focus on the main ideas rather than on a particular one” (p.130).

*Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students* (Bailey, 2011) defines a summary as “a shorter version of something” (Bailey, 2011, p.290), and notes three elements which comprise a good summary, namely selection of the most important aspects, a clear description, and accuracy. The following 5-stage procedure is also outlined: read the text carefully; mark the key points; make notes “paraphrasing where possible”; write the summary from notes, restructuring if necessary; and check to ensure accuracy (p.57). Texts with example summaries are then provided, followed by exercises requiring learners to follow the same procedure, with suggested word counts given.

In Collins English for Life: Writing (Campbell-Howes & Dignall, 2012), aimed at the general EFL market rather than focusing specifically on EAP, a summary is defined as “when you write down the most important points from a piece of text, a lecture, or a sequence of events” (p.44). The authors highlight that “it should contain all the key points, but not all of the detail” and that it “must be shorter than what is being summarized” (p.44). A 6-step procedure is provided, guiding the learner through the process from the reading of a text to writing a summary. The procedure is as follows: begin with skimming the text and noting key points from each paragraph; read again for thorough familiarisation with the text; note only the main points; start with a thesis statement; follow the structure of your notes to write the summary; and finally, check that sentences are “sufficiently different” from the source (p.47).

Although the above surveys only four textbooks, perhaps the first thing that is apparent is the scant coverage it receives in two of these four. For a skill Jordan (1997) claims is an “important aspect of academic writing” (p.170), and de Chazal (2014) states is a “core academic skill” (p.169), one might expect to find more guidance than is made available in the first two (Rogers, 2011; Van Geyte, 2013). In the remaining two (Bailey, 2011; Campbell-Howes & Dignall, 2012), the procedure outlined for summary writing appears to be similar, with the main points summarized then put together to form a complete summary. Within a number of teachers’ resources (see, for example, de Chazal, 2014; Edge, 1983; Gibbons, 2002), a similar approach is outlined, which, if followed, would result in the information in the summary being presented in the same order as the original text.

## **Issues and an alternative**

From the above overview, aside from the scarcity of coverage, two further issues relating to the summary writing procedures outlined are apparent. The first relates to the stage instructing students to pick out the main points from the source article,

with the textbooks examined providing little or no hint as to how these might be selected. If, as Edge (1983) claims, learners new to summary writing are likely more used to taking a bottom-up approach to texts, they would likely also benefit from more explicit direction in determining the main points. De Chazal (2014) highlights that main points may be differentiated from supporting points as the latter are often “in the form of examples and evidence” (p.169). He also suggests examining topic sentences to find the main idea of a paragraph, although does also note that not all texts follow such a format. With the other texts providing no further insight, more easily applicable instructions for uncovering the main points are arguably necessary.

The second issue relates to the resultant format of the summary should the approaches outlined above be adopted. While a paragraph by paragraph approach may be appropriate for some texts, it fails when applied to the structure of newspaper articles. As Martin and Rose (2008, p.75) note, news stories constitute a relatively recent genre, and differ from more established story genres through their use of multi-source perspectives and retelling of the story in a non-chronologically sequenced manner. Semino (2009) states that this latter point is in fact “a distinctive characteristic of news reports” (p.445). As such, following the summary approach highlighted above does not seem appropriate as key information is not presented in so linear a manner. Of the textbook approaches outlined above, only Bailey (2011) indicates that following the paragraph structure of the original text may not be the most appropriate form for the summary to take. However, he suggests only “re-organising the structure if needed” (p.57), giving no hint as to what structure might be best.

In contrast to the above approaches, Johns (1988) proposes an approach which “orients students to the underlying text-type” (p.86), claiming that this enables them to extract and present the main information in a more clearly structured order. The approach requires that learners be made explicitly aware of the text-type structure, the example provided being a problem/ solution type text, within which four elements are addressed: situation, problem, responses or solutions, and evaluation

(p.83). Echoing the point Martin and Rose (2008) note regarding the structure of news articles, Johns (1988) points out that information relating to one category is often located at various points within a text. Learners are therefore asked to find and note information relating to each category on a piece of paper divided to provide a box for each; information pertinent to the ‘situation’ element, for example, is noted in the relevant box. Learners are then asked to write up their notes from each box into short summaries, then combine these in order of the underlying structure (in this case, situation, problem, responses or solutions, and evaluation) to form the complete summary of the text.

By specifying categories which cater to different elements of the underlying structure, and requiring that learners find information relating to these, students are provided with far more specific direction in selecting the main points. Furthermore, in raising awareness of overall text structure, and requiring that texts be approached top-down, it arguably better develops what de Chazal (2014) claims are more proficient reading skills. While it certainly requires comprehension of a text beyond sentence level, piecing a summary together paragraph by paragraph does not address the overall text structure, and may be seen, therefore, to develop awareness of this aspect of reading proficiency to a lesser degree.

This author’s own approach to teaching summary writing has been very similar to that proposed by Johns (1988), only with questions directing students towards the main points provided by the teacher (for example, what is the main problem? Why is it a problem? Are any solutions suggested?). This approach was arrived at independent of Johns’ (1988) proposal, and having spoken with other teachers, it appears that they too approach it likewise. This would suggest, therefore, that more proficient readers (in this case the teacher), having greater familiarity with particular text types and their purposes, are also familiar with the moves through which these purposes are achieved. While learners may also reach such a stage independently through extensive reading, it is argued that making this information explicit at an earlier stage may be more beneficial (Richards & Rodgers, 2015). Johns (1988)

argues that approaching summary writing through the method she proposes achieves this.

Finally, while possibly not an extant term at the time Johns (1988) proposed this approach to summary writing, a genre-based approach appears to emphasise very similar elements. Hyland (2003) takes Martin's (1992) definition of a genre as "a goal-oriented, staged social process", arguing that texts are produced to achieve purposes, with the purpose determining what is and is not acceptable in terms of structural and linguistic features (p.18). Key here is that the process is staged, in other words a text producer must follow certain moves in achieving their purpose. It is these moves which Johns (1988) appears to propose be made explicit. Likewise, within a genre-based approach, learners are 'socialized' in the particular practices of a discourse community. With regard to the significance of such an approach, de Chazal (2014) claims that "research into genre has had a great impact on EAP methodology and materials" (p.59), while Charles and Pecorari (2016) comment that genre "has become one of the most widespread and valuable ways of [...] teaching EAP" (p.49). With these comments in mind, and given the similarities with Johns' (1988) proposal, one might expect to see it evidenced within the summary writing approaches outlined in the teaching materials examined above.

## **Conclusion**

Summary writing has been seen to be a valuable but difficult skill for less proficient English language learners, requiring as it does a top-down approach to texts. This paper has examined the methods for summary writing outlined in four EFL writing textbooks, three of which were specifically for EAP, and other teaching-related resources. It has found a similar approach is proposed across these sources, and has found this to be inadequate for two reasons: first, the instruction given to learners to determine the main points is seen to be too vague, and secondly, the paragraph by paragraph format that is suggested does not account for the way

information may be presented in the text being summarized. The approach Johns (1988) proposes, in directing learners more clearly towards the main points, and structuring the summary in accordance with the underlying text-type, appears to address both points. It was also suggested that more proficient readers, able to take a top-down approach to texts, may instinctively develop a strategy for summary writing which accounts for the text structure, but that learners would likely benefit from being made aware of such aspects at an earlier stage.

Such awareness raising of text types and structures is one of the key elements within current genre-based approaches to teaching EAP, approaches which are seen to be significant within the context. It is this last point which makes the lack of any mention of text structure with regard to summary writing within the textbooks examined all the more striking. Johns (1988) made her proposal almost thirty years ago, contrasting it with contemporary approaches to teaching summary writing. In the years since, a significant body of research that has been produced within the field of genre relating to text structure which appears to support her proposal. However, this paper has found an almost identical approach to summary writing as that prevalent thirty years ago still advocated in both general EFL and EAP- specific materials today. This strongly suggests that Johns' (1988) comments regarding the inadequacy of instruction given to teaching summary writing still stand.

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## EAP における サマリー・ライティング法についての一考察

ルイス・マリー

本稿は、まず EAP（学術目的の英語）教育におけるサマリー・ライティングの重要性を確認したうえで、近年の EFL（外国語としての英語）の教材において、サマリー・ライティングがどの程度取り扱われ、またサマリー・ライティングに関してどのような教育的アプローチが推奨されているかを検分する。次に、それらのアプローチが本稿の筆者自身の教授環境においてどの程度適用可能かを論じる。そのうえで約三十年前に提起されたジョーンズ（1988年）のアプローチを考察する。このアプローチは、最近の教材においてはまったく言及されない。しかし本稿が結論づけるように、最近の教材に顕著に見られる主な欠点は、ジョーンズのアプローチによって解消されるように思われる。