

Summary Content Active Readers, Active Writers in Dialogue

York College Writing Fellows Writing Across the Curriculum

What is Summary Content?

Summary response to writing promotes an active revision process by highlighting a particular reader's understanding in relation to a writer's intent. Below are suggestions as to how and why to implement this process in three settings: the professor's end comments to student writing, the student's response to these comments on his/her work, and between students in peer writing workshops.

How can professors use Summary Content?

Professor's End Comment

a. Explanation of task

In first paragraph of an end comment, the professor summarizes what he/she has understood in a student's paper.

This summary includes such comments as:

"This is what I see this paragraph doing..."

"This is what I understand your thesis to be..."

The second paragraph offers a deeper analysis with some suggestions for revision.

b. Justification

- Writing appears as a process through conversational exchange between a reader and a writer.
- "I" rather than "you" statements emphasize professor's role as an interpretive reader and respects student as a writer with ideas to express.
- Starting with a strict summary keeps comments grounded in the student's actual text, not an imagined Ideal Text.
- Referencing the student's text leads to specificity students can respond to rather than vague generalizations.
- Summaries point out the clarity of certain passages; these strengths within a student's text then serve as an example of what s/he can/should do more.
- Even when making suggestions for revision, professor stays focused on the writing's specific content. Try comments that talk about "this paper" or "your second paragraph" rather than "you." The former takes the emphasis off the person and onto the text they've composed.

c. Example

Lake Ivenho is unique because the only thing between you and the fish are the occasional patches of lily pads. The best solution to this problem is to work a top-water buzz bait in the early morning or late afternoon. I have hooked some big bass using this technique, but if the bass is big enough to give a good long fight it can be very difficult to get it through the lily pads. After fishing the lily pads that morning my next move was to work a plastic worm under the giant oak trees that hang out over much of Lake Ivenho. Bass like to hang out in these shady areas during the heat of the day so they can better spot unsuspecting prey swimming by. This didn't produce the monster bass I was looking for so my next move was to work a spinner-bait along the southeast bank of the lake. (Straub, "Teacher Response" 375-376)

I see this paper doing two things at once: expressing a first-person narrative of a particular day and offering general, informative advice. Both voices are well grounded in the experience of bass fishing on Lake Ivenho. The setting is clearly established through such details as “occasional patches of lily pads,” “giant oak trees” and “shady areas.” I’m swept into the precise terminology (eg. “a top-water buzz bait” and “spinner-bait”) which pulls me into the expert’s world. The sentences move between the narrative of a particular day’s experience and explanations of fishing methods.

Sometimes, the narrative tone is so strong that it dominates the text. For example, the second paragraph on page two remains focused on the story for its duration. For this assignment, the paper might benefit from using the personal narrative as *support* for the informative writing. Sometimes I get lost in the story and forget I am reading an explanatory paper. How could the setting of your day on Lake Ivenho serve as an example of your explanation rather than the central story?

How can students use Summary Content?

Student’s Response to Professor

a. Explanation of task

Take time in class when drafts are handed back for students to write summaries of what they understand the professor to mean in end comment.

b. Justification

- Both parties can then compare student's understanding to professor’s intent.
- This comparison gives a professor feedback on his/her own comments.
- A student's commentary treats the professor's end comment as a text itself worthy of interpretation.
- The student's voice highlights his/her role is an active participant in a dialog.

c. Example

You think my paper is strong in how it is specific with images and terms. It gets two things across: how to fish and the stories of when I go fishing. You think the first thing, information about fishing, needs to be the stronger voice. I should try to use my stories as examples. I’m thinking transitions will be a key way for me to do this. I wonder if I can write a summary of the explanation in each paragraph so I remember to keep it in mind.

Peer Writing Workshop

a. Explanation of task

Take time in class to have a peer workshop emphasizing this same summary technique: Students read each others’ papers and write a summary of what they’ve understood their classmate to mean.

b. Justification

- A change of audience emphasizes the varied understanding/reading processes possible.
- Working with a peer face-to-face enacts the conversational exchange of writing and reading.
- Being in the role of reader striving to understand a peer's text and explaining that process may help them read their own text differently.
- After listening to a peer's summary, students then work on revisions with the discrepancy between writer's intent and reader's understanding in mind.

c. Example

Your paper tells me a story about bass fishing, but it also gives some advice on what I could do if I wanted to go fishing myself. I learn that you’ve been fishing since you were a little kid and that you’ve

been a lot of places, but it's especially Lake Ivanho that you always return to. I can feel where we are very strongly, and the writing comes alive with those images. I don't know if I could go fishing, if I would have enough information after reading this paper, but I do feel like I want to at least visit Lake Ivenho! I was a little confused by some of the terms you used when you were talking about equipment.

But won't this be time consuming?

The following strategies incorporate Summary Content comments into a time-constrained schedule (Straub, "Teacher Response" 393-394):

- Focusing comments on the content in students' papers
- Limiting comments to one to two issues in two to three places
- Replacing a longer end comment with a few well-developed marginal comments and a brief summary of student's meaning
- Responding more extensively in the beginning of the semester
- Writing detailed comments for rotating groups of students

Still have more questions?

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