Reading for Summarising: An Approach to Text Orientation and Processing

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"Summary" is a superordinate term for a number of related discourse types found in business, industry and academia. Most summary instruction is product-based; students are provided with rules for a written summary and expected to understand how to follow them. However, if summarising is viewed as a complex *process*, then reading skills rarely considered in language coursebooks must be examined. These include reader orientation to the text, and procedures for working through the discourse in a manner which encourages selection and organisation of main ideas. The approach to reading for summarising described here focuses upon these skills, i.e. it requires the foreign language student to process and reformulate the entire original text before creating a summary product, thereby encouraging the development of reader schemata and the exploitation of special vocabulary which signals both the text type and the relationships among the propositions.

INTRODUCTION

"Summary" is a superordinate term for a number of discourse types which have in common these relationships with the original: (1) being shortened versions, (2) including only the main ideas, and (in most cases) (3) retaining the original organisation and focus.

The summarising task is one which is required in many contexts. In the business world there are minutes of meetings, abstracts, short reports and locational and restructuring digests. In the academic milieu there are article abridgements, shortened versions of lecture notes and textbook readings, in addition to summary/critique assignments. So whatever a person's interest in studying a foreign language, there seems to be no escape from the acquisition and development of summarising skills.

It could be argued that summarising is a writing task and therefore inappropriate for discussion in this journal. However, in order for teachers to understand its complexity and methods for teaching it, the summary task should be viewed as a *process*; we should consider what goes into reading and reformulating discourse before a successful product can be written. As the reader begins this process, he must initially orient himself to the text, to its content and structure (see, e.g. Carrell 1983). Orientation is described by Rumelhart (1977, 1984) as instantiation of reader "schemata" which account for texts previously read being related to the new discourse. Therefore, readers become oriented, comprehend and eventually

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summarise best when they have had past experiences with related texts, and can instantiate appropriate schemata. When they do not have such past experience, as in the case of many novice and foreign language students, then initial orientation may be inadequate or inappropriate. Once oriented, the successful reader proceeds through text, revising his schemata as he goes along, using as guides the special vocabulary items which signal the relationships and hierarchy among ideas.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO SUMMARY-WRITING

These orientation and processing skills which are required in reading for successful summarising are generally slighted in foreign language coursebooks; often it is the nature of the written product which is the focus of instruction. Even when the reading process is acknowledged, assistance for how to complete this process may be lacking. For example, one popular ESL coursebook, *Approaches to Academic Reading and Writing*, makes the following suggestions which assume a considerable amount about the reader:

1. Read the original text carefully.
2. Identify the controlling idea and the relationship among the supporting ideas.
3. Decide which examples are necessary for a clear understanding of the text.
4. Write a first sentence which includes the source of the summary and the controlling idea.
5. Indicate whether the author is uncertain of the facts or expressing personal opinions.
6. Avoid making comments about or adding information to the text.
7. Make the summary one-fourth or one-third the length of the text. (Arnaudet and Barrett 1984:145)

When students have insufficient assistance with orientation and processing strategies, they can become confused about how to approach the task, and thereby do so inadequately. First of all, they may fail to identify the controlling and supporting ideas. I have found this problem common to my own ESL classes. After presenting the Arnaudet and Barrett list to one advanced class, I asked them to read an essay entitled "The American Male" (Appendix A) and to underline the main ideas. One group of students merely underlined most of the sentences in the first three paragraphs, assuming that, as in newspaper articles, the important information is condensed at the beginning of the reading. A second, more sophisticated group – having been taught that the topic sentence appears at the beginning of every indented paragraph – highlighted the last sentence of the first

paragraph (the assumed thesis), and all of the initial sentences in the following paragraphs. However, research has shown that no more than one half of the paragraphs in authentic expository prose begin with a topic sentence (Braddock 1974). In the case of this text, there are several paragraphs devoted to examples; others are tangential. In addition, some of the topic sentences are of more importance (i.e. more central to the article's thesis) than are others, and are therefore on higher levels of the propositional tree (Rumelhart, 1977). So neither technique selected by the student groups was adequate for identifying the main ideas.

Another problem which students face is difficulty understanding the relationships among ideas, often indicated by the underlying structure of the text (i.e. the text-type), and the special vocabulary which signals these relationships. If they could overcome this difficulty, they might be able to better reformulate information, combining ideas in a manner which reflects their relationships in the original.

AN APPROACH BASED ON ORIENTATION AND PROCESSING STRATEGIES

So it is important, for teaching reading in preparation for summarising, to provide students with more opportunities to develop appropriate orienting schemata for target language discourse, and to teach them some transferable skills for processing text which allow them to identify main ideas and their relationships. Research in schema theory (see Carrell 1983) and the development of text-type taxonomies which reflect native speaker schemata can assist us in this effort. Here I will discuss the overt teaching of one text type, PROBLEM/SOLUTION (Hoey 1979, 1981, 1986), which subsumes a number of modes of development (e.g. comparison-contrast) and which can be generalised to both academic and business contexts in several languages. Like most text-type models based on schema theory, this one posits content slots to which a network of propositions are tied. In a coherent PROBLEM/SOLUTION text, these slots – *situation, problem/causes, responses/solutions* and *evaluation* – are filled in the discourse in a manner which requires consistency of topic and rhetorical relationships among ideas. Elsewhere (Johns 1986) I have discussed how teaching these slots and relationships through a "rhetorical network chart" can assist foreign language students in revising their own prose. In this paper, I will maintain that a focus on orientation and processing strategies in summarising another author's text eventually results in a product in which the main and subsidiary ideas parallel those of the original, and provides students with skills which are transferable to a large number of summarising situations.

THE SUMMARISING PROJECT

Though I have used this approach with both native and foreign language students, the group I will discuss here are ESL students preparing for a freshman-level writing examination, a test requiring the integration of information from a reading into their essays. These students have had little experience with academic writing, and even the best had difficulty producing good summaries.

I first gave these students the reading selected for the examination, "The American Male" (Appendix A), chosen because even though it spoke of Americans (i.e. long-term U.S. residents), the dilemma introduced is understood or faced by many individuals throughout the world. I distributed the rules for writing a summary from Arnaudet and Barrett (listed above) which typify many summary instructions in language coursebooks. We discussed this list and examined summary descriptions and models. Then I asked them to read "The American Male" and to follow the steps for summarising that we had outlined. Because Arnaudet and Barrett have a very good section on paraphrase, I recommended that they re-read it before writing.

I have selected two summary products which were representative of the class at this stage (see Appendix B), revealing the types of texts which can result from using coursebook rules which assume that students know how to go about the process.

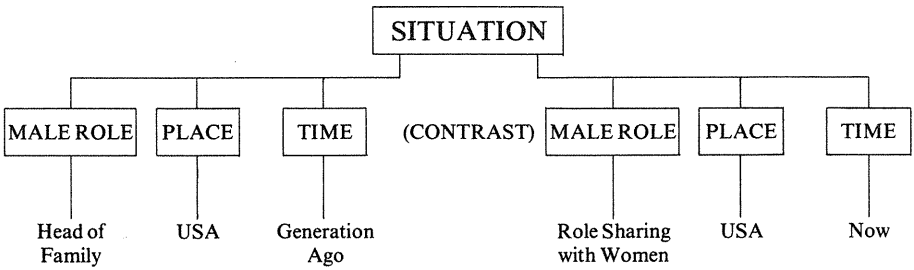
In the first example, by a Vietnamese student, there is the controlling idea and rhetorical structure revealed in the first sentence, as the instructions for summarising in Arnaudet and Barrett require. However, the selection by the summary writer of contrast as the basic organisation is inappropriate. Though contrast is implied throughout the text, it is the problems faced by men in their new roles which are central to the argument, and therefore should be the focus of the student's statement of the controlling idea. In addition, this summary is devoted primarily to the first few paragraphs of the original, making details (e.g. quotes from Mathilda Canter) central to the summary text, rather than including all of the main ideas.

The second example, by an Arabic speaker, exhibits other characteristics of the summary texts by foreign language students. The summary begins with a controlling idea – a comparison between the good and bad effects of the women's revolution upon the American male. However, the second, important cause of the problem (economic pressures) is ignored. This student does mention roles, of both men and women; and, unlike the Vietnamese, demonstrates that he has read more than one-half of the essay by discussing which groups of men are most affected by the changes in roles. Again, however, the focus is skewed: in the original, women's roles are implied, but it is men's roles that are central to the discussion. And, like the writer of the first example, this student does not discuss men's responses or the

author's evaluation of the problem. Thus all of the content slots are not filled.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the ESL students had difficulty following typical coursebook instructions for producing a summary product. Unable to step back from the text, they had difficulty identifying the controlling idea and underlying structure, and difficulty knowing which other ideas were main and which were subsumed. Discussing relationships among ideas was also a problem. Finally, they did not include ideas from the entire essay in the text, a situation often encountered in novice and foreign language summaries (Johns 1985; Johns and Mayes forthcoming).

It was then that I took another tack in reading for summarising, one that releases the students from uni-dimensional, line-by-line reading and requires them to orient themselves to the text: to process and reformulate it before beginning their writing task. I began by discussing the fact that most texts have an underlying structure which proficient readers identify and follow to better comprehend. One of these structures, I pointed out, is PROBLEM/SOLUTION. I then explained to my students that there are four categories of topics in PROBLEM/SOLUTION texts that they need to look for: *situation, problem, responses/solutions* and *evaluation.* Using 9 x 12 sheets of unlined paper, they drew four boxes, representing each of these "types" (i.e. content slots) at equal distances from each other at the top of the page. They were then asked to begin at the left (i.e. with the *situation*) to find all sentences in the reading that referred to it, and to describe the situation in their own words below the appropriate box, taking special note of the relationships among the sentences they discovered. They found that two *situations* were discussed, the past and the present. Most students indicated the relationships between these two by contrast:



Finding the *problem*, the next content slot in the original, was more difficult since bits and pieces of the problem statement appear throughout the reading, even as close to the end as the third from the last paragraph. At first, like the students in the example essays cited earlier, this group decided that there were various comparisons and contrasts implied. I agreed, but insisted upon their discovering the basic problem that the comparisons highlighted. Given that goal, the students

went through the reading and marked all of the sentences which they could identify as relating to the problem. Following this, they worked in groups to devise a single sentence which summarised it. Some of their summary sentences were:

— The problem of this reading is about American male who is trying to accept the new way of life of how to accept today's society.

— This article includes a lot of detail showing the changes of traditional American males.

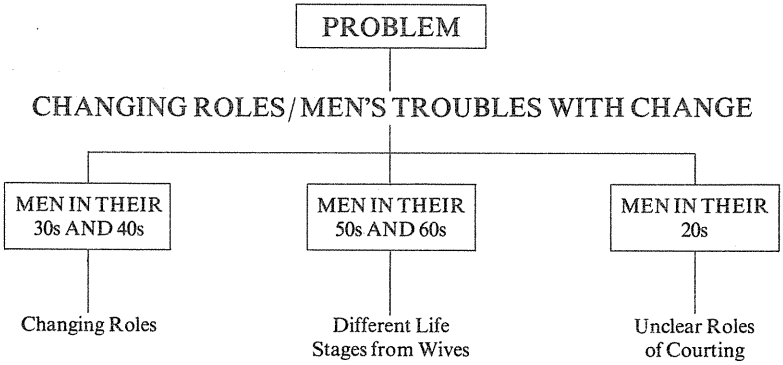
— His word around house was law. Now it's not.

— Men are losing control over women.

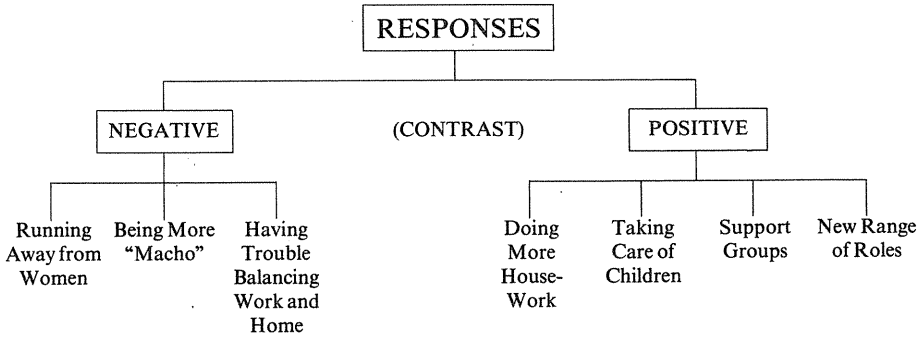
— Man role now change because women's revolution and economic pressure.

After considering these proposed problem statements and the sentences from which they were derived, the class decided that the best summary sentence would be something like: "Men's roles are changing and men are having trouble with the change."

Because so much of the reading is devoted to different age groups and how each group is affected by changing roles, the class decided that they should have a box under the problem statement listing which groups are affected and how, thereby including essential detail:



They then examined how men are responding to their problems in order to fill the third obligatory content slot in the underlying structure, *response(s)/solutions(s).* After marking all of the sentences in the reading that deal with that content slot, the students decided that there are two types of responses, "angry" and "happy", under which all ideas could be subsumed. I suggested that "negative" and "positive" might be better categories, and they agreed. Then students divided their list from the text into the two categories and added them to the chart:



Finally, we turned to the original authors' *evaluation* of the situation, a category which seldom appears in student summaries unless they are asked to locate it. This final content slot appears in the first sentence of the last paragraph. After discussing it, the students paraphrased the solution in a way that was true to the original: "Later on, the authors hope that men can be any kind of person they want."

At last, the students put aside the original and produced their own summaries, employing the chart that they had created as a group. Naturally, they copied some of the sentences we had devised together, in addition to attempting to indicate the relationships among the ideas.

Though the summary texts which resulted were not perfect at the sentence level, they represented more complete gists than had the earlier versions. Here is one example, written by one of the least proficient students, a Chinese-Vietnamese:

> According to an article in *U.S. News and World Report*, men used to be the most important person in his house, but today, it not the same. The problem is men's roles are changing and they are having trouble with the change. There are three groups effected by the changes. Males in 30 to 40 have suffered the most, men in 50's and 60's have hard time coping because their wives go out for work, men in 20's cautious about marry. Some men have unhappy responses like not getting marry and "the new macho". But as the generation went by most men are trying to response that they should take part of the women's role, like taking care of the children. Maybe later on, they can take any role they want.

Note that this text, though flawed at the sentence level, accomplishes much more than the earlier examples, which rely upon a set of steps or a script. The first sentences state the problem and reveal the major proposition and underlying structure of the text. All of the content slots required in the PROBLEM/SOLUTION text appear. In addition to essential details, the sentences are well-combined and often cross paragraphs, revealing rhetorical relationships among main ideas.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that a summary-writing approach which orients students to the underlying text-type results in a more accurate processing and written gist of the original text than does most of the surface script or rule-based instruction presently found in standard foreign language and ESL/EFL coursebooks. In this article, I have used the example of the PROBLEM/SOLUTION text because it is common in academic and business prose and undoubtedly crosses languages as discourse becomes increasingly influenced by English (see, e.g., Eggington 1985).

However, this approach does not apply exclusively to the PROBLEM/SOLUTION text. Since excellent work, discussed in an earlier volume of *Reading in a Foreign Language*, has been completed in the underlying structures (i.e. the content slots/constituents) of scientific texts (see Johns and Davies 1983), application can be made to PHYSICAL STRUCTURE, PROCESS, MECHANISM, THEORY/PRINCIPLE, FORCE, STATE/SITUATION, ADAPTATION and SYSTEM/PRODUCTION texts as well as others. Academic history texts have also been studied, generally as exponents of story grammar (Armbruster and Anderson 1982), and can be approached using the same technique.

Outside of the academic realm are other texts which reflect native speaker expectations analysable into content slots. Perhaps the most relevant to language teaching are those suggested by Zuck and Zuck in their discussion of newspaper "scripts" (1984) in an earlier issue of *Reading in a Foreign Language*.

This technique has broad applications for teaching reading and producing summaries in foreign languages, for it orients non-native speakers to the reading process required to produce a summary which reflects both the underlying structure of the original and the relationships among its ideas.

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APPENDIX A : Article for summarizing

The American Male

(This article from *U.S. News & World Report* was written by a group of editors.)

Little more than a generation ago, life was far simpler for the American male. More often than not, he was family patriarch and breadwinner. His wife catered to his needs and raised his children. His word around the home was law.

Not any more. As a result of the women's revolution and economic pressures, men today face a world in which macho no longer is enough. The new and improved model of the male is expected to share in breadwinning and child rearing and be both tender and tough.

Where once independence and aloofness were desirable, now openness, sensitivity and intimacy are prized. The shift in society's cultural icons tells the story. John Wayne and Humphrey Bogart have been replaced by Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford. Even the modern tough guy Clint Eastwood displays a new sensitivity on the screen in "Tightrope" as the divorced father of two.

But change in real life is far more complicated than in the movies, especially when men have few clear role models to follow. Many struggle to blend vestiges of traditional masculinity with what are regarded as softer, or feminine traits. "Men are confused and searching for their identity," say Mathilda Canter, a psychologist in Phoenix. Experts point to signs of the confusion: The wave of androgyny in popular culture in the persons of Boy George and Michael Jackson and the trend toward young males wearing earrings.

Changing rules. Males in their 30s and 40s – "the transitional generation" – have suffered the most. "Many of them married with one set of rules and now feel that the rules have changed," says Graham Spanier, a sociologist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Some of their marriages end up in shambles. Even those whose marriages are intact struggle with the shift in values.

Men in their 50s and 60s also have a hard time coping on occasion. Some reach the verge of retirement only to find that their wives have decided they want to go to work. Psychologist Canter tells of a 57-year-old man who initially supported his wife's desire to get a job. But when she was promoted from office worker to a management post and began to travel, his world started to crumble.

Only men in their 20s, who came of age after society began to assimilate a decade of social upheaval, seem to take matters in stride. But they have other problems in an era when the rules of courting are unclear. They often are unsure of how to treat single women and are more cautious about marriage. Result: A bachelor boom. The proportion of men between ages 25 and 29 who are single soared from 23 to 38 percent between 1960 and 1984.

Psychologists say some men respond to the current confusion by fleeing commitment and rejecting pressure from women to be more open. Others take refuge in what has been dubbed "the new macho," convinced that women still want a traditional man, even though they say otherwise. Fearful of being branded "wimps," they contend that real men don't eat quiche or change diapers but instead swig beer and smoke cigars. Recent films such as "Cloak and Dagger," in which

boys learn to be men by shooting to kill, are indicative of macho's return, says Peter Biskind, editor of *American Film* magazine.

But experts agree that macho's rise is really only a blip in a long-term trend toward change. They say it is impossible for men to return to the old ways in a society in which more than half of all married women and about 65 percent of younger wives are in the labor force.

Studies show that, slowly and sometimes painfully, men are adjusting. The Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan found that between 1965 and 1981 men in the 24-to-44-year age group increased the amount of time they devoted to housework by 20 percent. Many now take a major role in their children's lives from the day of birth. A survey by Levi Strauss and Company found that 4 out of 5 fathers are present in the delivery room as compared with only 27 percent a decade earlier. The study also found that most fathers now change diapers. Anxious to excel in their new roles, some are enrolling in fathering courses that are burgeoning nationally.

Divorced men get involved, too. Boston University psychologist Ron Levant, who teaches a course for fathers of school-age children, says about half the men enrolled are separated or divorced fathers, many with joint custody.

All of these changes have caught the eyes of advertisers. "They recognize that men are involved in the home in ways that were unheard of 10 years ago," says Alice Goldberg, director of research services for Benton and Bowles, a New York advertising agency. Now, diaper ads show men holding the baby, and a toothpaste ad has the father brushing the child's teeth.

Just as many working women strive to be "Supermom," more fathers also try to be "Superdad" in seeking to balance the often conflicting demands of home and job.

Samuel Osherson, a Harvard University psychologist, cites a financial analyst who was on the verge of becoming a partner in his firm. His boss wanted him to work 60 hours a week, while his wife wanted more family time. "He tried to satisfy both without great success," says Osherson.

Many men complain that, like women, they are trapped by society's strictures. To loosen their bonds, they band together in organizations that are male counterparts of the women's movement. Some provide men with emotional support in times of stress, a development that psychologists applaud. Others such as Fathers United for Equal Rights are politically oriented and push for changes in divorce and custody statutes. Many organizations also advocate paternity leave for new fathers – as women have maternity leave – and more flexible work hours to give men freedom to meet family responsibilities. What all these groups share is a desire to have society accept men in a wider range of roles. "The motto of the movement is be

yourself," says Dan Logan, who heads a Washington, D.C., organization called Free Men.

Other signs of men's growing self-awareness: Courses in men's studies are springing up in universities, and the *New York Times Magazine* now has a regular column called "About Men."

Out of all the turmoil, say experts, ultimately will emerge a less rigid definition of masculinity that allows men to be comfortable with whatever paths they select. That switch is already under way. Over time, much of the conflict that now buffers relations between the sexes will diminish. "The problems will gradually iron themselves out," says University of Vermont psychologist Phyllis Bronstein. "We're at the awkward stage right now."

APPENDIX B: Student papers – as written

Vietnamese speaker

In the article "The American Male," the author compared the role that the American men play from the past and present. In the past, a man was a family patriarch and breadwinner. Now they have to share the women's works, such as childrearing and the housework. In the article, the author used the statement of Mathilda: "Men are confused and searching for identity" to show that it must be very hard for men in this generation. Working 60 hour a week while his wife wanted more him to spend more time with family is one of the problems for men. Men in this society have more family responsibilities than men in the past, but many of them have psychological disorder. This is what Mathilda means by "Men are confused and searching for identity."

Arabic speaker

Women's Revolution has good and bad effect on American's male. Male before revolution works outside the house and women stay inside the house, taking care of it. When women starts to work outside the house, it change the role of the society. Women started to share the men in their work and asked man to share with her the responsibility of the house. These changes have effect on males varies with their ages. Males in their 30's and 40's have suffered the most. Males in their 50's and 60's hard time to coping on occasion. Only man in their 20's who began to assimilate a decade of social upheaval. Even though, they often unsure how to treat the single women.