

Lesson 21: Re-Do Chapter 8 Summary

2 Class Periods

Reading Skills: **Determining Importance
 Summarizing**

Purpose:

I was not satisfied with my students' performance on their summaries of Chapter 8. They did not make wise decisions about which information was the most important. I felt like I needed to drop back and punt! In other words, we needed to work on summarizing skills again. You may not need to complete this lesson with your students.

Materials:

Each student will need a copy of *Four Perfect Pebbles* or a photocopy of Chapter 8 with the sections marked in the text.

Process:

I started with a pep talk. I wanted to increase their motivation to learn this difficult skill because I was not confident that they really had given me their best effort the first time they summarized Chapter 8 back in Lesson 19. I told my students, who are 8th graders, that summarizing is an absolutely essential skill that they will be expected to perform frequently and independently in high school. I told them that the fastest way I can find out if my students get the point of a reading assignment is to ask them to summarize it. I told them that it is an absolutely crucial comprehension skill.

I also told them that summarizing is an essential skill on-the-job. I gave them examples of how I have to summarize in the course of doing my job. I gave them other examples from other jobs. Bosses don't want to know the nitty-gritty details. Most of the time, they want to know the bottom line... Which textbook would be the best to adopt and why? Which phone company should be hired to provide service to the company? Which investment plan is the best? What is the plan for meeting a customer's needs? We also use summarizing in social situations... What was the movie about? What happened at the game? What was the main point of the governor's speech?

Coincidentally, just before I taught this lesson, I came across the following passage in *Mosaic of Thought* by Keene and Zimmermann:

 Though our memories of being asked to summarize might not be fond, research ... has long indicated that teaching children to summarize is a helpful tool in teaching reading comprehension. The research confirms what we know through experience and common sense: Proficient readers are able to summarize as a way of helping them recall what they read and then communicate it to others.

 We also know that as they reach the upper grades, students are expected to summarize more frequently; and upper-grade teachers express frustration about their students' underdeveloped summaries, particularly for nonfiction.

I read this passage to my students, mostly because I wanted them to know that I was not alone in my opinion that summarizing skills are important.

Next, I felt that the students needed a more concrete way to decide which ideas were important enough to include in the summary. I really struggled with this. I had to analyze my own thinking process so as to better understand how I decide what's important in text. Then I had to figure out the words I could use to communicate my decision-making process to my students.

I told them that a good writer doesn't waste words telling about things that aren't necessary. So, in a sense, everything in the text is important. However, when you summarize, you can't and don't want to re-tell everything. I told them that it helps me to think about sorting ideas into one of two categories: need-to-know and nice-to-know. The nice-to-know things help make the text interesting; they give you ways to connect the text to your own experiences and make it come alive with sensory images. If you didn't have some nice-to-knows in the text, it would be like reading an encyclopedia article or a summary! The text would be boring.

Next, I gave the students some examples of nice-to-know ideas in Chapter 8. Many people in their initial summaries of Chapter 8 told about how Marion drank beer. This seemed to stand out to my students because of its novelty and its difference from our culture. I asked them to put themselves in Marion's shoes. After living through years of cruelty, starvation, and deprivation, could they imagine how Marion would feel drinking an icy cold beverage at an army hospital where her infected leg was being treated and where people acted toward her with kindness? I asked them if they could understand that it was the cold drink on a hot day and the kindness that made the memory so vivid for Marion. I shared with them a text-to-self connection I made with this passage. It reminded me of sipping cold beer from a juice glass that my grandmother poured for me while we watched the summer Olympics together when I was a kid.

The next paragraph of Chapter 8 offered another example of nice-to-know information. Any kid would get a kick out of standing with each leg in a different country. I remember standing with one leg on each side of the Mississippi River when I was a kid! These kinds of details make the memoir a memoir – a story told from memory. They make the text more interesting and easy to connect with. They help us relate with another human being who was a child far away and in a different time. They serve an important purpose, but they are not need-to-know pieces of information that ought to be included in a summary.

Then I shifted my focus to need-to-know ideas. I told the students that, since this book is a memoir, it tells about the experiences of one person and her family. Therefore, the most important question that a good summary should answer is "What happened to the Blumenthals?" I told them that in summarizing non-fiction, it is a good idea to look for the answers to the "wh questions." They could try filling in a sentence frame like this: *Who did what when where and why or how?*

At this point in the lesson, we began working together as a class summarizing section-by-section. I asked a student to read a section aloud. Then we stopped and used the sentence frame to summarize the main ideas of each section. This process took a lot of modeling and discussion. For each bit of information a student offered for inclusion in the summary, I tried to respond by explaining why I thought that piece of information was a need-to-know or a nice-to-know. The need-to-knows we included and the nice-to-knows we, for the most part, left out. If we included a nice-to-know in the summary, we discussed our reasons for doing so. As we worked, I turned the responsibility over to the students to justify their thinking.

I think it's important to note that a very high degree of trust needs to exist in the classroom for this type of activity to work well. Another fine point worth mentioning is that section six of this chapter deals with the process of getting the documents needed for US immigration. This process was explained more fully back in Chapters 2 and 3. The reader is expected to remember what he/she read in those earlier chapters and connect it with Chapter 8; my students had some trouble with this.

Four Perfect Pebbles Ch.8
Summary by Sections

1. The surviving Blumenthals returned to Holland after their liberation in 1945 as “displaced persons”. Ruth was a widow at age 37 with two children to support and no financial resources.
2. The family lived at first in Amsterdam with Walter’s cousins, Gerda and Ernst de Levie. Although there were still shortages of goods, Tante Gerda managed to obtain a new dress for Marion and she tasted chewing gum for the first time.
3. Next the Blumenthals lived in a shelter for displaced persons. Albert made his Bar Mitzvah. To prepare for emigration to Palestine, Albert and Marion were sent about an hour away to a Youth Aliyah to learn Hebrew and the Orthodox religion.
4. Ruth stayed in Amsterdam with Walter’s sister, Rosi, and studied to be a beautician and manicurist. Uncle Ernst arranged for Marion to have surgery to correct her crossed eyes.
5. After Ruth completed her training, she bought a bicycle so that she could travel to the homes of her clients. The Blumenthals could only visit each other about once each week, and Marion missed her mother. As the date for departure for Palestine drew closer, they learned that only the children would be allowed to go and that they would be traveling illegally. Ruth did not want to take the risks involved, so she began to investigate the possibility of going to the US instead.
6. Once again Ruth had to obtain an affidavit and a visa for the US. The Holland-America Line still had record of the Blumenthal’s payment for four passengers in 1938; therefore, most of the cost of their passage for three in 1948 was covered.
7. The Blumenthals sailed for New York in April 1948.
8. They were on deck to see the Statue of Liberty when the ship sailed into New York harbor on April 23, 1948 – exactly three years after their liberation from the death train.

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