
WRITING A BOOK SUMMARY

WITH



BOOKSHELF ACADEMY

IMPORTANCE OF SUMMARIZING

Summarizing is an important skill, but it can be surprisingly tricky for many learners. Oftentimes children get caught up in sharing the details, or if the story is complex, they will veer off course to discuss a subplot rather than the main plot. Practicing the skill of summarizing fictional literature will lead to better communication and critical thinking skills in all other areas of life. In learning to summarize what they read, your kids will learn to communicate concisely and effectively. They will also, I believe most importantly, learn to answer the question: What is this about? Being able to answer that question when consuming information is the first step in being a well-informed member of society.

Let's get started!

FIVE KEY QUESTIONS TO WRITING A SUMMARY

1. Who is/ are the main characters?

Identify the main character, and stick to the main character. While there may be another character your child liked better, or one who served an important role, writing a summary focuses on the main character.

Identifying the main character doesn't stop at a name but also includes a brief description. If I told you, "Alice in Wonderland is a delightful tale of Alice's adventures in a world full of unbelievable places and characters," you would have no idea that the story is about a child. When the writer identifies the character, using descriptors such as age and a personality trait will create a more vivid and complete picture of the story.

2. What is the mood of the story?

Describing the mood of the story is important in a summary. If someone is reading a book review, they want to know if the story is scary, funny, suspenseful or heart-warming. The mood of the story is easy to include by using adjectives in the opening sentence. For instance, instead of saying, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is the story of..." you could say, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is the delightful, whimsical tale of..."

3. What is the main conflict (struggle/ obstacle/ problem) or journey?

This is usually the question that stumps a young writer the most. In great literature we often see a main conflict, and then along the way the character will face sub-struggles. This is where young learners tend to veer off-course in their summaries. For example, in *The Vanderbeekers* five siblings work together to persuade their landlord to let them stay in their brownstone, the only home they've ever known. Within that larger struggle, we see other subplots and minor struggles- one sister feels like she is losing her twin, the youngest trains her pet rabbit with the elderly neighbor upstairs, and their brother is struggling to find Christmas gifts at the last minute. All of these stories within the story can overwhelm your child when they begin to write their summary. Helping them to name the main struggle and stick to it will keep their summary on track.

Other times, the story is a journey with no main struggle, but rather a series of events or struggles. In those cases, the writer needs to identify and state the journey. For example, in *Little Women* we read about the March sisters, their adventures growing up and the lessons they learn along the way. In a summary of this book, there is not one central problem. It is a journey to adulthood. The journey would be the focus of the summary.

4. How was the problem solved/ How did the character change?

The last thing to identify is the solution to the conflict. For both stories with a conflict and one that follow a character's journey- be it their childhood, a summer adventure, or a lifetime- looking for how the character changed or grew is also something to identify.

5. What is the theme?

Identifying the theme of the story is a good way to end a summary. Once you have walked the reader through the story, identifying the theme brings the summary full circle back to where you began.

TIPS FOR BUILDING SUMMARY SKILLS

- ❖ **READ EXAMPLES:** In the same way our children learn to write well by reading well written literature, they will learn to summarize by reading other summaries. Let your kids begin by reading professional book summaries from online bookstores and jacket covers to familiarize themselves with traditional formatting and structure. They will see that even though every writer has their own unique style, their summaries will always answer most, if not all, of the questions above.
- ❖ **PICTURE BOOKS & TV SHOWS:** These two resources are helpful in getting started with summarizing. The simpler text and story line makes it easier to identify major conflicts over minor conflicts.
- ❖ **COMPARE BOOKS & MOVIES:** Movies are never exactly like the book, and identifying what is the same vs what is different can make the main plot points, themes, and conflicts more obvious. In most cases, the changes made to a story to go from book to film are not details that change the overall storyline. The larger similarities between the two is often where you will find the information for summarizing.
- ❖ **MAKE IT MEANINGFUL:** To make book summaries meaningful, let your children write book reviews for Amazon or Goodreads rather than simply writing them in a notebook. My own kids love sharing their book reviews online for others who may be interested in the same book.

SUMMARY VS. REVIEW

If your child writes a book review, it will look slightly different than a summary. A book review will include everything a summary includes except the solution. In place of the solution, your child will tell what they liked about the book, what they learned from the book, and who they think would enjoy reading the book- children, adventure lovers, kids who like to laugh, etc. They can also compare the book to another book, “If you enjoyed _____, I think you would also enjoy this book.”

Summarizing takes practice, but it’s worth the effort. It will not only help your children develop critical thinking skills, it will make them better communicators in virtually all areas of life.

The printable on the following page can be placed in your child’s binder to use as they begin writing their own summaries.

I CAN WRITE A SUMMARY

5 QUESTIONS TO ASK MYSELF:

1. WHO IS/ ARE THE MAIN CHARACTERS?
2. WHAT IS THE MOOD OF THE STORY?
3. WHAT IS THE MAIN CONFLICT (STRUGGLE) OR JOURNEY?
4. HOW WAS THE PROBLEM SOLVED/ HOW DID THE CHARACTER CHANGE?
5. WHAT IS THE THEME?