

SECTION



LEARNING TO SUMMARISE

Unit 7 Topic Sentences and Main Ideas

Unit 8 Sieving out Details

7 TOPIC SENTENCES AND MAIN IDEAS

HOW TO SUMMARISE

To summarise is to give the **main idea**. It is something we do quite often without realising that we are doing it. For example, after watching a show, we tell our friends how much we enjoyed or hated it, giving them a synopsis of the plot. Other examples include studying for tests, for example, a history test; we make an outline of the chapter, noting the main events and why they happened. These tasks involve making summaries.

When you read the original text, ask yourself these questions if they help you see the point of the writing:

- ▶ What is the text about?
- ▶ What is the topic?
- ▶ What is the common important point in these sentences?
- ▶ What main idea do all these sentences tell me about?
- ▶ What does the author think/feel/believe?

Another useful tip to bear in mind is that authors may often begin or end a paragraph with a **topic sentence**, especially in expositions.

Example The speaker likened an organisation to a country, with three levels of people in it. The emperor or monarch sits on top of the organisation, the workers are at the foundation level and the managers occupy the middle level. Each group has a different role to play to make the organisation a viable one.

Can you spot the topic sentence that tells you what the paragraph is about?

The topic sentence is *'The speaker likened an organisation to a country, with three levels of people in it.'*

However, this is not the usual practice in many text types such as narratives and recounts. Then you need to ask the four questions listed earlier to help you arrive at the main points.

NOTE

If the author repeats an argument or an idea (even if it is stated differently), this signals that it is important.

EXERCISES FOR MAIN IDEAS

Read the original text and pick out the main idea(s). Study the example below before you begin.

Example Original text

An organisation can be likened to a country, with three levels of people in it. The emperor or monarch sits on top of the organisation, the workers are at the foundation level and the managers occupy the middle level. Each group has a different role to play to make the organisation a viable one.

Main idea(s)

- an organisation is like a country
- three groups of people
- monarch, managers, workers
- each group has its role

EXERCISE 6

Original text

Of course, some newspaper articles cannot, by nature, be absolutely lacking in opinions, views and comments. The editorial and forum pages are key examples of such articles. The editor should base his or her daily article on the most significant or striking event of the day. A good breath of general knowledge should be readily available to complement insightful, well-reasoned comments. The editor may have to take a stand but the fact that he or she supports one particular view ought to be clear to the reader so that the latter need not be influenced or swayed to think otherwise. As such a good balance of arguments and counter-arguments is essential.

Main idea(s)

EXERCISE 7

Original text

What makes a plant? Most of us would say a plant is different from humans and animals because it can make food using a process called photosynthesis. Also, it is relatively immobile with roots in the ground. It should not come as a surprise, however, to learn that some plants do not make their own food or that they have some degree of mobility.

Plants that do not photosynthesise have to find food for their survival. They may do this by 'hunting' or 'stealing'. The Venus flytrap is one such carnivore. It hunts with leaves that are traps for the innocent fly that approaches it. The fly finds the vibrantly coloured leaves attractive as they are coated with sweet nectar but end up being a meal once trapped by the leaves!

Main idea(s)

8 SIEVING OUT DETAILS

To summarise, we need to read for the gist – the main points. We write in a concise manner, not repeating the points or using more words than necessary. We sieve out details. In addition to asking questions about the content, we can use the following techniques as well:

Technique	Original text	Paraphrased version
Removing examples	Some housewives like Mrs Lee and Mrs Kumar purchase condiments, such as salt and pepper, in bulk.	Some housewives buy condiments in bulk.
Removing adjectives and adverbs	There are diverse games to entertain yourselves during the boring waiting period. The attitude of customers is extremely difficult to understand.	There are games to entertain yourselves during the waiting period. The attitude of customers is difficult to understand.
Removing prepositional phrases	The flower of the plant is red in colour.	The flower is red.
Removing empty expressions	There are only fifteen marks for the summary. The clown that is part of the circus is coming to perform for my friend's birthday party.	The summary merits only fifteen marks. The circus clown is performing for my friend's birthday party.
Using one word or a short phrase	The working conditions of foreign maids are getting worse. Foreign domestic workers are given more pay nowadays.	The working conditions of foreign maids are deteriorating. Foreign domestic workers are paid more nowadays.
Removing redundancies	Today, free gifts will be given to all customers who patronise us. In my opinion, I think social media is a boon.	Today, gifts will be given to our customers. I think social media is a boon.

8.1 REMOVING EXAMPLES

How do we tell if something is only an example or if it is an important point?

Examples are used to illustrate or explain a main point. They include the following:

- specific names of people, places or things
- certain dates or days
- statistics or numbers
- specific events or cases

You can do a simple test to determine if something is just an example by trying to substitute it. If it can be replaced with another example, it is not the main point but merely an illustration.

Example **Earthquakes** and **landslides** have caused unthinkable devastation.

Ask:

Can I replace **earthquakes**? Can I replace **landslides**?

How about typhoons and hurricanes?

Yes, they can replace the given examples of earthquakes and landslides.

Typhoons and hurricanes have caused unthinkable devastation.

Since earthquakes, landslides, typhoons and hurricanes are disastrous events brought about by nature, this means I can use the term **natural disasters** after removing these examples.

I can paraphrase the original text as:

Natural disasters have caused unthinkable devastation.

NOTE

Authors use a variety of ways to insert examples to support their main arguments or points. Some of these words that signal the author intends to give a list of examples are the following:

- including
- such as
- like
- for instance
- for example (e.g.)
- namely
- that is (i.e.)
- ranging from

8.2 REMOVING ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

Most sentences usually contain **nouns** and **verbs**.

Example Teenagers love mobile phones.

noun **verb** **noun**

In addition to nouns and verbs, sentences may contain words like **adjectives** and **adverbs**.

Example Teenagers nowadays absolutely love fanciful mobile phones.

adverb **adverb** **adjective**

NOTES

- ▶ Most of the time, adjectives and adverbs give more details and add onto the main ideas in the sentences.
- ▶ They are not main ideas themselves.
- ▶ We leave them out in our summary because they are not core ideas or key points that we need in the gist.

Watch out for adjectives or describing words that are used before and after nouns. Decide if the additional description is important. Leave it out if it contains merely additional details of minor importance.

Also remove adverbs or modifying words as they merely mention minor details about the main ideas.

EXERCISE 2

Cross out the adjectives and adverbs in the sentences below. Then write the remaining main ideas in the space provided.

Example The ~~slow~~ sloth is a ~~virtually~~ helpless creature on the ground.
The sloth is a helpless creature on the ground.

1. It could possibly be true or it might possibly just be his vivid imagination.

2. Some people can actually pick up useful skills online.

3. It is absolutely essential that you have a strong password.

8.3 REMOVING PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Prepositions are words like *in*, *at*, *on*, *with* and *for*. They often tell us about time (in the morning, at 9 a.m.), place (on the floor, at school), accompaniment (with my friends) and purpose (for a living).

Examples The tsunami may hit the coastal towns **in all probability**.

The enthusiastic students looked forward to learning **at school**.

During the group work, I discussed my ideas **with my group members** before the teacher gave her comments **to our group**.

These plants manufacture their own food **with the process of photosynthesis** in order to survive.

NOTES

- ▶ Prepositional phrases give additional information about main ideas relating to minor ideas such as time, place and purpose.
- ▶ Since the information is superfluous, you can safely remove it most of the time.

EXERCISE 3

Cross out the prepositional phrases in the sentences below. Then write the main ideas in the space provided.

Example The stars twinkled ~~in the sky~~ and were a rare phenomenon ~~to behold~~.
The stars twinkled and were a rare phenomenon.

1. Is the snake green in colour and long in length?

2. The hero in the movie was a handsome man who married the heroine in the end.

3. In similar situations like these, the teachers gather the students together in the hall for a briefing.

4. Most of the birds are affected by oil spills and there is the danger of them ingesting the toxic substances.

8.4 REMOVING EMPTY EXPRESSIONS

Empty words include the following:

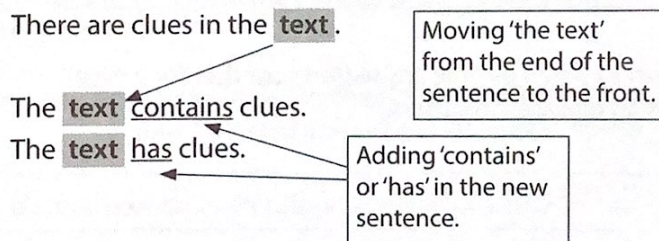
- ▶ Sentence openers which add nothing to the meaning of the sentence
Example There is .../There are ...
- ▶ Relative clauses beginning with who is.../which is.../that is...
- ▶ A host of words that do not add important meaning to the main ideas. They bore the reader and distract them from what is significant.

SOME COMMONLY USED EMPTY PHRASES

- as far as I am concerned ...
- needless to say ...
- all things being equal ...
- as a matter of fact ...

NOTE

After removing the empty expressions, you may need to rewrite the sentences, for example, by moving some words to the front and adding your own words:



EXERCISE 4

Remove the empty expressions by rewriting the sentences below.

Example Men who wear business suits may, in actual fact, be either managers or company executives.

Men in business suits may be managers or company executives.

1. There is a toy in each package that has been wrapped.

2. Some students get up early before sunrise in order to catch the first bus to school.

3. What makes a shark so dangerous is the fact that it will attack when provoked.

8.5 USING ONE WORD OR A SHORT PHRASE

Authors may write longer sentences than necessary. By replacing the longer words with single words or shorter phrases, you can save words in your summary. Remember not to exceed the number of words allowed for your answer.

EXERCISE 5

Shorten each sentence below using one word or a short phrase to replace the underlined words.

Example Scientists estimate that about 600 monarch butterflies are living in the forest at this point in time.

Scientists estimate that about 600 monarch butterflies are living in the forest now.

1. We plan to do the presentation of our project in the beginning of next week.

2. The group put up a spectacular performance at the Istana.

3. Jim spoke in a soft whisper to Mary for a brief moment in the reading corner.

4. Before a shark launches an attack, it circles the potential victim.

5. The human body is made up of mostly water.

6. The person invigilating in the hall has to walk up and down the aisle.

7. The police apprehended drunk people who turned violent in several pubs and bars.

8. This branch specialises in medicine for the young.

9. People suffering from leprosy were ostracised in the past.

10. The Prime Minister is concerned about the large number of people consuming alcohol.

8.6 REMOVING REDUNDANCIES

Many words like adjectives and prepositions may sometimes be used although they are redundant and serve no purpose.

Examples **free gift**

(Of course, a gift is something given to us and so it is free.)

heat up

(We know hot air rises or goes up but when we heat our food, it does not go up!)

NOTE

We remove redundancies which are unnecessary words that often repeat what is already stated. Be aware of redundant prepositions which may be ungrammatical. Avoid them at all costs!

Example Can you spot the redundancy in this sentence?

Let us discuss about the project.

Hint: To discuss something is to talk about something.

Therefore, it is redundant to have the word 'about' after the word 'discuss'.

The grammatical sentence is **Let us discuss the project.**

EXERCISE 6

Cross out redundant words and phrases in the sentences below. Then write the main ideas in the space provided.

Example If you don't pay ~~up~~ and get a receipt now, you will not be entitled to a free gift .

If you don't pay and get a receipt now, you will not be entitled to a gift.

1. The shop offers free gifts to the first one hundred customers that patronise it on its opening day.

2. We need to eliminate entirely the pests that multiply in the crevices.

3. The illegal workers were extradited back to their countries of origin.

4. Put on this face mask as a disguise for the masquerade party.

5. My fellow classmates, let me show you the exact same copy of the painting.
