

A TRIED AND TESTED METHOD FOR WRITING SUMMARIES AND NOTES

Here is a tried and tested method for writing notes and summaries, which has been used successfully by many students. You may, of course, work out your own preferred method.

To approach a summary exercise

- 1 First of all, read the question carefully and underline the key words as you read.
- 2 Look carefully at the heading of the text, and at any pictorial information such as a diagram or photograph, before you begin to read the text, in order to pick up extra clues about the content.
- 3 Read the text fairly quickly, with as much concentration as possible. However, slow down and re-read any parts you find confusing.
- 4 Underline key parts of the text that are relevant to the question set.
- 5 Draft a rough paragraph from the key words and phrases, using sentences. Use your own words as far as you can. Specialised terms and technical words do not need to be changed.
- 6 Count the number of words you have written. Make corrections to the grammar and spelling if necessary, and add any linking words to make your paragraph flow more smoothly.
- 7
 - a Write a final draft in about 100 words.
 - b You may find you are pressed for time and do not have time to write out a neat final copy. In this case, making corrections to the first draft, such as altering punctuation, putting in a linking word or correcting grammar, is quite acceptable practice and well worth doing.

To approach a note-taking exercise

Use the above method as far as 4. Then complete any numbered points or bullet points that are given by copying short, relevant words and phrases from the text, or adapting phrases from the text, using words of your own. You do **not** need to write complete sentences.

Be selective and don't just copy out large parts of the original. Remember, you are making notes, not writing paragraphs. Your completed notes should be brief, concise and easily understood, even by someone who has not seen the original text.

Time management

In the exam, you should aim to spend **about 20 minutes** on the **summary** exercise. This could be broken down as follows:

Reading: 7 minutes

Drafting a first version of the summary: 6 minutes

Writing a final version, or making careful improvements to the first draft: 6 minutes

Checking: 1 minute.

You should aim to spend **about 15 minutes** on the **note-taking** exercise. This could be broken down as follows:

Reading: 7 minutes

Completing the notes: 7 minutes

Checking: 1 minute.

Exactly how much time you need to spend on the summary or note-taking exercises will be affected by the difficulty of the texts, as this can vary from year to year.

Your summary should *not* contain:

- any kind of introduction
- any direct speech (words inside speech marks “ ” said by people in the passage)
- repetition of words or ideas
- exact figures, numbers or statistics
- anything that is not clearly stated in the passage, especially your own ideas, even if you cannot find many points in the passage.

Using linking words

EXAMINER'S TIP

When writing a summary, you often have to make a series of separate points. You can link them in different ways.

To build up a list of points, use linking words such as *firstly*, *secondly*, *also*, *in addition*, *as well as*, *furthermore* and *moreover*.

Linking words which show contrast include *but*, *although*, *on the other hand*, *in spite of*, *despite*, *however* and *nevertheless*.

Words for reasoning include *because*, *as*, *since*, and *for this reason*. Result or consequence can be expressed by *so*, *consequently*, *therefore* and *as a result*.

You can round off your argument or list of points with expressions like *Finally*, *On balance*, *To sum up* and *In conclusion*.

Apart from showing the examiner that you can reason and sequence your ideas clearly and logically, using linking words will also demonstrate that you are in control of sentence structure, and your paragraph will flow much better. This will help you to gain the highest marks.

Time fixer phrases

When writing formally, it is often good style to begin the introduction with a *time fixer*, such as one from the selection below:

Nowadays

These days

Until now

Every day/week/year

Recently

For many years

In the past

Ten years ago

In the last few/five/days/weeks/months/years

Since + specific time/noun

Look at these examples:

Thirty years ago, nearly all children went to single sex schools.

For many years, environmentalists have been warning about the effects of global warming.

Nowadays, most teenagers own a mobile phone.

If there has been a *change* in the situation you are writing about, two *time fixers* can be used to show contrast and create interest.

Thirty years ago, nearly all children went to single sex schools. *These days* most schools in this country are mixed.

Generalisations

Sometimes a minor modification (change) can make a big difference to your sentence. Some statements can sound very dull. For example:

Tourists drop litter.

Sentences can be modified by the use of various generalisations. You can use these on their own, or in combination throughout a sentence.

- One of the simplest ways is to use one of the following generalisations, at the *beginning* of the sentence. This makes it more acceptable to the English ear. Your sentence will also sound more convincing.

Almost all	}	tourists drop litter.
The vast majority of		
A large number of		
Most		
Many		
Some		
A few		
Not many		
Hardly any		

in almost all cases,	}	tourists drop litter.
in the majority of cases,		
in a large number of cases,		
in most cases,		
in many cases,		
in some cases,		
in a few cases,		
On the whole,		

Look at these examples:

Almost all teenagers enjoy watching television.
The vast majority of teenagers enjoy watching television.
in many cases, pollution is the result of ignorance.

These phrases can add focus to a dull statement (as above) or can replace exact figures, numbers and percentages (see below).

Look at this example from a summary passage which includes the following sentence:

A study shows that 95% of teenagers spend five hours a week watching television.

A summary must not contain figures or percentages or specific numbers. Therefore, a generalisation could be used to express the same information:

The vast majority of teenagers enjoy watching television.

- A frequency word, such as generally, usually, often or sometimes can also be used as a generalisation to achieve a similar effect.

Teenagers often watch television.
Generally, teenagers enjoy watching television.
Teenagers generally enjoy watching television.

★ Note

Generalisations are also very useful for writing summaries of reading passages that contain figures, numbers or statistics.

Using your own words

EXAMINER'S TIP

Remember that, although the instructions in the exam tell you to 'use your own words as far as possible', words of technical meaning such as *seedlings* and *propagation* can be taken directly from the text. Moreover, the examiner will not expect you to find substitutes for every word in the text, provided you can show you have sufficient range of vocabulary to use your own words quite often.

In assessing how good your writing is, the examiner will also look in general at your overall control of language, and the way you have reorganised and structured sentences.

Specialised and technical terms

EXAMINER'S TIP

Sometimes a text will contain a specialised or technical term, such as *gabion stretchers*, which a student could not be expected to know. If this is the case, the specialised term is explained within the text, as it is here (*cylindrical wire baskets filled with rocks*).

When you write a summary, you may need to include either the specialised term or the explanation of it. Do not use both – you should choose either one way or the other of referring to it. The specialised term itself is usually briefer than the definition, so using it in your summary will help you to write more concisely.

Punctuation

EXAMINER'S TIP

Correct punctuation makes a difference to the clarity of your work. In the exam it is expected that basic punctuation such as full stops and capital letters will be accurate. A full stop is used to show the end of a complete sentence. Try to get into the habit of putting in the full stops as you go along, by 'hearing' what you are writing in your head. Don't leave it until the end of your writing and then put them in – you are much more likely to put the full stops in the wrong place if you do this.

Remember to use capital letters for the following: the first letter in a sentence, people's names and titles, nationalities, names of places, days of the week, names of months, book and film titles, and the pronoun I.

Try noticing how the punctuation is used when you read English books and newspapers. This is an easy way to reinforce your understanding of how punctuation makes meaning clear.

Writing concisely

EXAMINER'S TIP

The summary question asks you to write 'about 100 words' – you are allowed to write a few words under or over 100. When practising summary writing, however, think about ways you can save yourself words.

For example, try not to copy out whole sentences from the text as this usually leads to using too many words. Also, several nouns in the text can often be grouped together as one collective noun, rather than listing each one separately. The collective noun you need may actually be in the text – for example, *allergen* on the opposite page, which can be used to refer to a list of substances such as *pollen*, *milk*, *strawberries*, *nuts*, etc. You have to decide yourself whether it is necessary to name each item separately in your summary, or whether it is possible to use the collective noun.

The advantages of using collective nouns are that, as well as reducing the number of words you write, they show the examiner that you have a good command of English.

Likely exam topics

EXAMINER'S TIP

Sometimes students ask to be given a list of topics which might come up in the exam, so that they can prepare for them. As this is an English language exam, there is no strictly prescribed topical content. The best advice is to take a wide interest in topics of all kinds.

However, environmental topics, such as those to do with waste and recycling, the effects of global warming, pollution, disappearing wildlife, heat and drought, and other world problems regularly make their appearance in the exam. The reason for using these kinds of topics is because they are of general interest, they are international in perspective, and they affect everyone. They also might involve issues you will be discussing in other parts of your curriculum, such as science or geography.

To help yourself feel more confident and comfortable with the topics, you could watch interesting documentaries, read newspaper features or listen to lively current affairs programmes on the radio in English or your own language. You might find that, not only do you feel more at ease with exam topics, but you also have interesting things to tell your friends after school.