



Session

ORGANISING IDEAS THROUGH SUMMARY AND SYNOPSIS

At the end of this session, international students will be:

- Able to summarise the main argument in an article
- Familiar with the use and content of a synopsis
- Able to identify signal words which introduce relevant context, evidence and debates to support the argument
- Able to write a synopsis of an article which captures the article's argument and ways in which it is supported.

How and when to use this material

This session consists of three short activities to assist international students to organise their ideas through, first, writing a summary, and then building on this by writing a synopsis in preparation for a literature review or essay.

To undertake these activities, students would benefit from having participated in the following preceding sessions: Reading: Skimming, scanning and previewing; Reading critically; and Note-taking strategies for lectures and seminars. These give students practice in identifying the structure and main points of an article.

This session precedes and builds skills in preparation for the session on **Critical thinking and synthesis**.

Introduction

In the Chinese learning context, students are often required to summarise a text. There are fewer requirements for them to provide a synopsis and synthesis. Therefore, students often need to be instructed in how to differentiate between summary, synopsis and synthesis and how to develop these skills.

In essays and literature reviews, postgraduate students in Australia must demonstrate their critical engagement with the readings. Synopsis writing helps students first to organise the main arguments, debates and evidence put forward in the readings. It makes it easier for students to then select, re-organise and synthesise arguments, evidence and debates as they prepare their argument or critical review. There are three activities in this session which can be delivered as a single session, or as three short sessions where each activity contributes to more slowly scaffolding the development of skills in summarising and synopsising.

Lecturer input

By now students should know how to read and take notes from different articles and chapters in preparation for writing an essay or literature review. However, to write a successful essay or literature review requires students to be able to produce a clear *synopsis* which captures authors' main ideas and arguments. In the next session, this is developed further into a synthesis.

To begin, explain to students the following definitions and differences:

A summary: this is a brief overview of content, in the reader's own words, that does not contain details.

A synopsis: this is like a summary, but it goes into more detail and so it can be longer. An abstract at the start of a published article is a synopsis because it gives an overview but also provides some details, including details about the main argument and conclusions.

A synthesis: this is a combination of two or more summaries or synopses in a meaningful way. For example, you might draw together themes that you have observed in a number of different texts and organized these into a coherent argument.

To write a good synopsis, students must first identify the main idea or argument in a text. In the following activity, students will be introduced to and practice this skill.

It is important that students have already read the selected excerpt for discussion before they attend the session.

Student Activity 1: Identifying and summarising the main argument

This activity is based on an excerpt from the following article:

Reich, Z. 2014. Islands of Divergence in a Stream of Convergence. Comparing the news practices of male and female journalists in Israel. *Journalism Studies*, 15(1), 64-81. See **Handout 1: Excerpt from Reich 2014**.

Lecturers may prefer to choose a different excerpt of similar size and complexity that is relevant to their own reading lists.

- Students should have read the excerpt in advance (note that it is only one page long) and considered the question 'What is the author's main point?'
- In the seminar, ask students to skim read the whole article on their own. Then they should read it through again to identify the main argument and underline key words or phrases as they go. This should take only a few minutes.
- Then, turning the article over so they are not reading from the text, they should tell a partner what they think is the author's main idea or argument, using their own words.
- After discussion, each pair should agree on two sentences that capture the main argument, and write these down. They can look at the article again at this stage and use some of the author's words or phrases in their summary.
- Invite some pairs to share their two sentences with the main group for discussion. The sentences can be read aloud, and the lecturer might write these up on the whiteboard, or alternatively students might stick their written answers up on the wall for them to read while walking around, and then discuss as a class, noting any different versions.
- Now give out one example of a brief summary of the argument, pointing out that the core ideas are stripped back and condensed. Use here the attached **Handout 2: Example summary and synopsis of Reich argument**.

Example summary:

Female reporters in Israel have higher time pressure, initiate more contact with their news sources, and work less in the newsroom than male reporters. As a result of working from home, female reporters may miss out on important relationships and opportunities.

Lecturer input

After **Student Activity 1**, explain that essays and literature reviews require discussion of the different arguments and ideas in the literature. When we create a synopsis, it reminds us of how the author introduces and uses evidence to support his or her argument.

For this reason, a synopsis may include the author's main argument, along with more detail about the evidence that the author has used.

Explain that academic authors must present an argument which addresses broader context and other points of view, as well as evidence from their own research if they want to be taken seriously. *Signal words* can help readers to identify where the author is citing evidence from his/her own study or where he or she is comparing and contrasting the ideas and views of other authors.

In the next exercise, students will identify signal words in the text, and use these to see how authors introduce evidence and compare ideas to support their arguments.

Student Activity 2: Identifying evidence, ideas and debates in the text

This activity uses the same excerpt but students are required now to change partners. Pairs might be selected according to same or contrasting colour shirt, or seating arrangements.

- Building on the last activity, students should now have a summary of the main idea or argument in the excerpt. Ask students to consider how Reich, the author, strengthens the argument in the excerpt by using evidence from his own research or other people's ideas or research. Ask pairs to find one statement that supports the author's argument and identify the type of evidence that supports the statement.
- Hand around copies of the attached **Handout 3: Signal words in the excerpt** to each of the pairs, giving them a few minutes to look at the highlighted 'signal words' and the information following them. Explain that this handout identifies some of the words that are used to introduce or 'signal' evidence, ideas and debates that support the main argument.
- Showing the attached PowerPoint **Slide: Signal words introduce ideas, evidence and debate**, point out how certain words are used to introduce

context, evidence from a study and other views or possibilities, in order to strengthen the argument. Remind students that academic writers must show that they have taken these factors into account if they want their argument to be taken seriously. For a few minutes, go through how each piece of text outlined in the third column of the slide strengthens the author's main argument (see third column which is entitled 'Ideas, evidence and debate').

- Ask students to identify any other signal words highlighted in the text and to suggest how these words introduce material which strengthens the argument. The lecturer fills in the last signal words and the last column on the whiteboard in response to student suggestions.

Lecturer input

Now that students have identified the main argument and four or five ways in which the author has supported that argument, they are ready to write a synopsis. The lecturer should tell students that this final exercise gives them practice in writing a synopsis in their own words, although they can also use some key words and phrases from the article.

A synopsis outlines the main argument and explains how the author builds and strengthens his or her argument through context, other possibilities, evidence from own research and reference to other research.

Student Activity 3: Writing a synopsis

Drawing on the attached PowerPoint slide (**Slide: Signal words introduce ideas, evidence and debate**) as well as the notes generated from the class discussion, instruct students to spend ten minutes composing a synopsis underneath the main argument outlined in **Handout 2: Example summary and synopsis of Reich argument**.

- The synopsis should outline how the author has used context, comparison, evidence from own research and reference to other research to support his argument.
- After composing the synopsis, students should compare what they have written with their partner. They can make changes to improve their final piece.

- To complete this activity, set students two readings for preparation for next week and ask them to write – and bring to the next seminar for discussion - a one to two page synopsis of each reading.
- For an example of a synopsis, turn back to the synopsis part of **Handout 2: Example summary and synopsis of Reich argument** where a synopsis of the whole article by Reich (2014) is provided.

Note to lecturer

Students from China are often grammatically different in how they express themselves, and this can trigger a negative view by lecturers of what otherwise may be quite appropriate content. Some of these surface features are outlined and explained in the Briefing Note on **Common problems that Chinese postgraduate students experience in English language usage**.

Student Activity 4: Personal Glossary

Students to add new / key vocabulary / phrases to their personal glossary from their learning in this session.

Each student to share one phrase with the whole group.

Note to lecturer

The creation and ongoing development of a personal glossary enables students to build a working vocabulary - with definitions - for important, unfamiliar or frequently encountered concepts, idioms and metaphors that will be useful during their study of media and communication.



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Additional materials and resources are available from
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

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