

1.7 Summarising

Making oral summaries is a common activity, for example when describing a film or a book. In academic writing it is a vital skill, allowing the writer to condense lengthy sources into a concise form. Like most skills it becomes easier with practice, and this unit explains the basic steps needed to achieve an accurate summary.

1 What makes a good summary?

■ Write a summary of one of the topics below in no more than 20 words.

- (a) One of your parents
- (b) A town or city you know well
- (c) A film you have recently watched

- Compare your summary with others in your class. What is needed for a good summary?

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2 Stages of summarising

Summarising is a flexible tool. You can use it to give a one sentence synopsis of an article, or to provide much more detail, depending on your writing needs. But in every case the same basic steps need to be followed in order to meet the criteria discussed in (1).

- Study the stages of summary writing below, which have been mixed up. Put them in the correct order.

- Write the summary from your notes, re-organising the structure if needed.
- Make notes of the key points, paraphrasing where possible.
- Read the original text carefully and check any new or difficult vocabulary.
- Mark the key points by underlining or highlighting.
- Check the summary to ensure it is accurate and nothing important has been changed or lost.

3 Practice A

- Read the following text (3.1) and the summaries (a)–(c). Rate them 1 (best) – 3.

- Fruit crops have usually been picked by hand, as it is difficult to mechanise the process. But in rich countries it has become hard to find affordable pickers at the right time so fruit is often wasted. Therefore intelligent machines have been developed that can overcome the technical problems involved, and also provide the farmer with useful data about the plants.

3.1

MECHANICAL PICKERS

Although harvesting cereal crops such as wheat and barley has long been done by large machines known as combine harvesters, mechanising the picking of fruit crops such as tomatoes or apples has proved more difficult. Farmers have generally relied on human labour to harvest these, but in wealthy countries it has become increasingly difficult to find pickers willing to work for the wages farmers are able to pay. This is partly because the demand for labour is seasonal, usually in the autumn, and also because the work is hard and demanding. As a result, in areas such as California part of the fruit harvest is often unpicked and left to rot.

There are several obvious reasons why developing mechanical pickers is challenging. Fruit such as grapes or strawberries comes in a variety of shapes and does not always ripen at the same time. Outdoors, the ground conditions can vary from dry to muddy, and winds may move branches around. Clearly each crop requires its own solution: machines may be towed through orchards by tractors or move around by themselves using sensors to detect the ripest fruit.

This new generation of fruit harvesters is possible due to advances in computing power and sensing ability. Such devices will inevitably be expensive, but will save farmers from the complexities of managing a labour force. In addition, the more intelligent pickers should be able to develop a database of information on the health of each individual plant, enabling the grower to provide it with fertiliser and water to maintain its maximum productivity.

- (b) Developing machines that can pick fruit such as tomatoes or apples is a challenging task, due to the complexity of locating ripe fruit in an unpredictable outdoor environment, where difficult conditions can be produced by wind or water. But recent developments in computing ability mean that growers can now automate this process, which should save them money and increase their profits.
- (c) Strawberries and grapes are the kind of crops that have always been hand-picked. But many farmers, for example in California, now find it increasingly difficult to attract enough pickers when the fruit is ripe. However, computing advances have produced a solution to this problem, which will save farmers from worrying about the pickers, and also collect vital data.