Making a synthesis (3): deciding criteria for selection; deleting and unifying information

In Units 6 and 7 we saw that identifying sequences *within a text and* distinguishing levels of information (*e.g.* causes *from* effects, *or a* thesis *from its* arguments) *are the first basic steps in making a synthesis of a text.*

The next stage involves clarifying the criteria *for deciding what to highlight: What is the* purpose *of our notes or summary? How* detailed *should they be? What are we most interested in, e.g.* facts *and/or* opinions? statements *and/or* examples? *What do we (or the reader of our notes or summary)* already know *and can therefore leave out?*

1. Number the paragraphs in the text on the next page. Then read it quickly and decide how you could divide it into sequences. Next to each sequence write the *topic* – or the *aspect* of a topic – you think is dealt with.

2. A. Which sequence(s) would you consider particularly relevant if you were more interested in

a) aims of American schools?
b) school levels in the American educational system?
c) local and national school financing?
d) effectiveness of school education?
e) socio-cultural problems?

B. Consider paragraphs 3/4/5. Which sentence(s) would you underline if you wanted to highlight

a) only some *very general* statements about socio-economic differences between schools?
b) also one or more *concrete* examples and illustrations of such differences?

C. Look back at paragraphs 9 and 10. Which sentence(s) would you underline if you were more interested in

a) summarizing American *feelings* and *attitudes* towards educational achievement in today's schools?
b) providing *examples* of positive and negative results of American education?
c) giving an *explanation* for the relatively low effectiveness of the system?

The simplest way to produce a synthesis of a text is, of course, to delete *unwanted information, keeping only what we consider important or relevant to our purposes.* Topic sentences (*cf.* Unit 3, Text Processing Strategies), *which usually* introduce *or* summarize *the basic ideas of a paragraph or sequence of paragraphs, are particularly helpful as ready-made syntheses.*

3. A. Refer back to the text and say which sentences, if any, you would consider to be useful *topic sentences*.

Remember that topic sentences, which usually (but not always!) appear either at the *beginning* or at the *end* of a paragraph, generally focus on *general ideas,* not on examples or illustrations.

B. Write a summary of the text.

– Decide its purpose and its expected users (*e.g.* will *you* use it for study purposes? Will it appear in a school magazine or classroom poster, as background information to a book or film review? Will *you* use it to prepare an oral presentation to the class?)
– Decide the *topics* you want to include.
– For each topic, see if you can use one or more of the *topic sentences* you have identified in A above.
– Decide if *examples* or *more detailed information* would be useful. See if you can use more sentences from the text.
– Try to link together the various parts of your summary in a clear structure.

4. *Visual devices* like tables, graphs and charts are very useful to produce a synthetic picture of many kinds of information. Look back at paragraphs 7/8 and label the following chart.
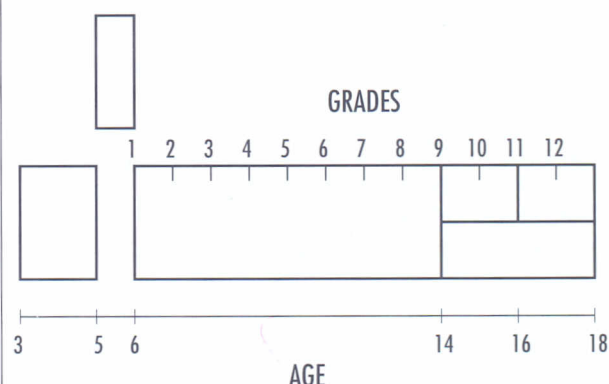
AMERICAN EDUCATION

The right to free public education is an important American principle. The public education system is organised through local school districts. It is divorced from national government and there are no uniform standards of education maintained across the country as a whole.

There are almost 27,000 school districts, most being town or township units, and they vary considerably in size. Public elementary and secondary schools rely mainly on local taxes for their financing, though there is some state and federal support.

Because of economic differences, the level of education offered can vary considerably from one district to another. In general, the more money a child's parents earn, the more will be spent on his school, despite some efforts at public expenditure to upgrade schools in poor areas.

Within the major cities there can be extreme differences in educational expenditures as between the affluent white middle-class suburbs which demand good schools and can pay for them, and the inner city with its ghettos, its poverty, and a population less interested in education or lacking influence in the school district. The inner-city schools often have obsolete and overcrowded buildings with inadequate equipment and staff. There may be language problems, arising from the influx of immigrants from Puerto Rico (especially in New York City) and Mexico, and of southern Blacks with poor verbal skills. The schools in the suburbs generally offer the better programme, in well-equipped buildings staffed by well-qualified teachers.

There are also contrasts between rural and urban school districts. Many rural districts are either too poor or too small to provide quality education.

State laws vary as to ages and circumstances of compulsory attendance. In most states formal schooling must begin by the age of seven and continue to sixteen. Depending on the state, the public elementary and secondary schools can provide education from as early as age five to as late as eighteen.

Children can enrol for kindergarten when they are five, though in some states this is optional. The kindergarten classes meet for about two to three hours a day. There are excellent private 'pre-schools' for those who can afford them, taking children from ages three to five.

Formal education for most children begins in the elementary or «grade» school. The class of each year is a grade, and the six-year-old enrols in Grade 1 where he first learns the basic reading and writing skills. The elementary school includes Grades 1 to 8 in most parts of the country. At about fourteen years of age the child enters the secondary system of «high school» terminating in Grade 12, or «junior high» for Grades 9 and 10 and high school for the final two grades.

Educational achievement is always a difficult thing to measure, but some facts may be offered briefly. While a century ago one out of five Whites and four out of five Blacks in America were illiterate, almost everyone can now read and write. Comparing American education with that of other nations, the International Study of Achievement in Mathematics showed American students to have one of the poorest performances of all the developed nations studied. There is a growing feeling in educational circles that the American school system may not be teaching its children as effectively as possible.

To understand this, one must appreciate that education in the usual sense is not necessarily the primary aim of the American schools. The part which the schools played in the assimilation of the sons and daughers of the alien immigrants in the nineteenth century was very important in welding such diverse people into a nation. Without some means of providing them with the values of the dominant culture and giving them a sense of patriotism and of belonging to America, it is difficult to see how national unity could have been achieved. But the needs of the twentieth century, and of the complex modern technological society, are somewhat different, and the schools have been slow to respond to some of these new demands.
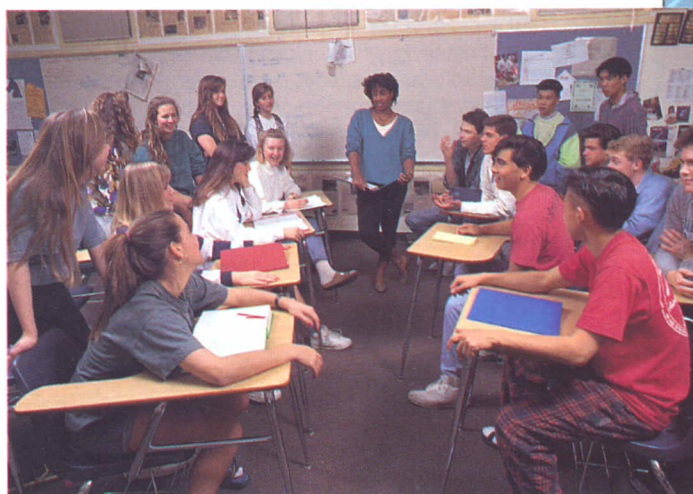
GLOSSARY

upgrade (par. 3) = improve
staff (v.) (par. 4) = provide the people who work for
enrol (par. 7) = join a group or course
can afford (par. 7) = have enough money to pay for
achievement (par. 9) = result; something sussessfully finished
aim (par. 10) = objective, purpose
weld (par. 10) = join (cf. *saldare*)

Some Very Modest Proposals for the Improvement of American Education

Nathan Glazer *

It is generally accepted that we can do a great deal for the sorry state of American education by using more financial resources. Even apparently modest proposals will, however, cost a lot of mon-ey. On the other hand, the occasional visitor to American schools will note some changes that would cost much less, nothing at all, or even save money – and yet would improve at least the educational *environment* in American schools.

In the spirit of evoking further cheap proposals, here is a small list of suggestions that, to my mind at least, would mean a clear plus for American education.

In the first place, I would disconnect all loudspeaker systems in American schools – or at least reserve them, like the hot line between Moscow and Washington, for only the gravest emergencies. The American classroom is continually interrupted by announcements. These remind teachers or students to bring in some form or other; or students engaged in some activity to remember to come to practice or rehearsal; or they announce a change of time for some activity.

Why would this be a good idea? One reason is that the loudspeaker interrupts efforts to communicate complicated material that requires undivided attention. Second, it humiliates the teacher as a professional: every announcement tells her that whatever she is doing is not very important and can be interrupted at any time. Third, it accentuates the notion of hierarchy in education – the principal and assistant principal are the important people, and demand time and attention even in the middle of instruction.

Secondly, I propose disarming the school. One of the most depressing aspects of the urban school in the United States is the degree of security within it, and that seems to me quite contradictory to what a school should be. Outer doors are locked. Security guards are present in the corridors. Internal doors are locked. Passes are necessary to enter the school or move within it, for outsiders and for students.

It is understandable that some degree of security is necessary. There is valuable equipment – typewriters, computers, audio-visual equipment, that can be stolen; vandalism is a serious concern; marauders can enter the school to search for equipment or teachers' pocketbooks.

However, I believe the school should feel less like a prison than it does. One should examine to what extent outside doors must be closed; to what extent the security guard cannot be replaced by local parents, volunteer or paid; the degree to which the endless bells indicating 'stop' and 'go' are really necessary. One must consider the atmosphere of the school and a school's primary objective as a teaching agent: we should try to reconcile this with a condition of maximum security.

In the third place, I would like to suggest that we enlist the children in keeping the school clean. In Japan, for example, the children clean the school; they sweep up and wash up. This does, I am sure, suggest to them that this is *their* school, that they are not simply going to a foreign institution that imposes alien demands upon them.

Another suggestion I would like to put forward is that we should save old schools and build fewer new ones. It has often surprised me that while in schools such as Eton and Oxford old buildings are highly valued, in so many American communities older public schools are torn down. Indeed, many of the reforms that seemed to require new buildings (for instance, classrooms without walls, activities centers in large open rooms) have been found to be not so desirable. Our aim should be to give each school a history, a character, something that at least some students respond to.

My next proposal is – look on new hardware with a skeptical eye. I think that the passion for new teaching hardware may well make us forget the real and hard tasks of teaching – which really require almost no hardware at all, besides textbooks, blackboard, and chalk. It is true that when one comes to high school science, something more is needed. But we are always fascinated by new hardware. It's *fun* to get new audio-visual equipment, or, as is now the case, to decide what kind of personal computers and software are necessary for a good educational program.

If we resist the appeal of new hardware, we will not only save money, but will also be able to concentrate on the principal tasks of reading, writing, and calculating. Students will have time enough to learn about computers when they get to college, and getting there will depend almost not at all on what they can do with computers, but how well they understand words and sentences, and how well they do at simple mathematics.

Finally, I would consider letting students, within reason, choose their schools, or letting parents choose them for them. As we all know, the two great issues of religion and race stand in the way of such a simple arrangement. Students are regularly bused from one section of a city to another because of their race, and many students cannot afford to attend that substantial sector of schools that are called 'private'.

I ignore the question of whether, holding all factors constant, students do 'better' in private or public schools, in racially well-mixed or hardly mixed schools. The evidence will always be uncertain. But students will do better in a school that forms a community, in which teachers, parents, and students all agree that *that* is the school they want to teach in, to attend, to send their children to.

I have avoided the grand proposals – for curriculum change, for improving the quality of entering teachers, for establishing national standards – all of which seem reasonable to me. Rather, I have concentrated on the essentials of teaching and learning as I (and many others) have experienced it.

In the meantime, why not disconnect the loudspeakers?

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GLOSSARY
plus (par. 2) = advantage, gain
rehearsal (par. 3) = practising the parts in a film or play for later performance
marauders (par. 6) = people in search of something to steal or destroy
to what extent (par. 7) = the degree to which (cf. *la misura in cui*)
enlist (par. 8) = join the army; join a group by putting one's name on a list

6. Draw a chart like the one below. Then skim the text again and list the six 'very modest proposals' that the author is making. Use short imperative forms.

PROPOSAL	SUGGESTION	ARGUMENTS
1.	Disconnect all loudspeaker systems, or reserve them for only the gravest emergencies	

7. **A.** Each of the proposals that the author makes consists of
– a *suggestion* expressed in very general terms;
– an *explanation* or *illustration* of the problem for which the author offers a solution; this is often accompanied by practical *examples;*
– one or more *arguments* to convince the reader that the suggestion is a valid one; again, this is often followed by *explanations* and *illustrations*.

Read the first proposal and mark the boundaries between these different *types of information*.

B. Read the first proposal again. Double underline *only* the sentence(s) expressing the *suggestion* the author is making. Underline *only* the sentence(s) that best summarize the *arguments* that he presents to demonstrate the validity of his suggestion. *Do not underline examples, illustrations or explanations.*

C. Repeat the steps in B above for the other five proposals. Remember, however, that the information in each of them may be organized in slightly different ways.

In Exercise 3 in this section we saw that the simplest way to produce a synthesis of a text is to delete unwanted information. Other useful devices consist in omitting words, condensing phrases and sentences, using symbols and abbreviations, and rephrasing the information, using one's own words if possible. For example, we might summarize the author's arguments in the first and last proposals like this:

PROPOSAL	SUGGESTION	ARGUMENTS
1.	Disconnect all loudspeaker systems, or reserve them for only the gravest emergencies	loudspeakers – interrupt communication – humiliate teachers and their activities – accentuate hierarchy: principal ↓ teachers ↓ students
6.	Let students and parents choose	School = a community where everybody agrees that *that* is the place where they really want to be

8. Look at the *arguments* you have underlined in Exercise 7B and try to summarize them next to each of the other four suggestions in your chart.

9. Most of the *arguments* the author presents to support his proposals, and most of the *explanations* he gives, consist of *personal opinions*. However, in some cases he also quotes *actual facts*.

Can you give some examples of statements which you consider as *real facts,* i.e. things that are clearly true or can be proved? (Be careful! It is sometimes part of an author's skill to present *opinions* as if they were *hard facts*!)

10. Discuss the following questions. Give reasons for your answers and refer back to the text whenever necessary.

1. After reading the texts in this section, what would you consider to be some of the most serious problems in American education?
2. Do you think the proposals made by the author are sensible? Do you think they would really improve American schools?
3. Refer back to the proposals to 'ask students to help keep schools clean' and to 'look on new hardware with a skeptical eye'. Do you agree with the ideas put forward by the author?
4. Think of your present school. What «modest proposals» could you make to improve it?

11. Write an article entitled *Some Very Modest Proposals for the Improvement of Italian Education*.

- Write an introductory paragraph.
- Devote a paragraph to each proposal:
  - state the *suggestion* very clearly;
  - *explain* what prompted you to make it, giving practical *examples*;
  - present your *arguments* for the proposal, adding *explanations* and/or *examples* as necessary.
- Summarize your proposals in a final paragraph.