

The Three-Sentence Summary: A Quick and Easy Assignment to Encourage Students to Do the Reading

Abstract

When teachers assign readings, we're usually wondering – Did the students do it? Do they know what this reading is about? The Three-Sentence Summary provides a simple and effective solution to this timeless problem. The assignment requires students to complete an assigned reading and summarize the key points using only two sentences. In the third sentence, students reflect on the importance of the reading to them personally (e.g., applicability to their future career). This assignment not only ensures that students come prepared for class, it also promotes reading comprehension, all while providing the teacher with a short, easy-to-grade assignment.

Keywords

Writing Skills, Student Preparation, Student Engagement, Reading Comprehension, Self-Reflection

Introduction

As college instructors, we carefully curate readings that are valuable for students, but often find that students do not take the time to read them. Moreover, students often wonder what they are supposed to take away from these readings and how they are applicable to their lives. In an effort to address these issues, we propose the three-sentence summary assignment. In this assignment, students read an assigned article then write a summary that is precisely three sentences long. In the first two sentences, they will summarize the major/key points from the article. In the third sentence, they will reflect on the meaning of the article to them—what are the key takeaways from this article that will be useful to know and apply to their business career?

The authors have used this assignment successfully in both undergraduate and MBA courses, although it can be used at any level of education and in any type of business course. It is suitable for traditional classrooms or online courses. Not only is the writing assignment meaningful for students, it is simple and fast for instructors to grade as well.

Theoretical Foundations

At any level of academia, students are expected to complete the required readings and assignments before arriving for class. However, at the undergraduate level of education and beyond, faculty commonly report that students often come to class unprepared (Jenster & Duncan, 1987; Taft, 2016; Whetten, 2007). To combat this trend, the three-sentence summary encourages students to complete assigned readings before class. Further, it helps students engage with the material by giving them an opportunity to identify key concepts relevant to management (or any subject) and summarize them succinctly into just two sentences (McLeod & Maimon, 2000; Ruane & Chappell, 2017).

Research demonstrates that restricting student writing to only a few sentences has been used to teach critical thinking skills, which are at the higher end of Bloom's taxonomy (Kolbel & Jentges, 2017). Therefore, it ought to be an appropriate approach for reinforcing students' lower order thinking skills such as Remembering, Understanding, and Applying. Along these lines, the three-sentence summary incorporates elements of the IDEAL writing framework, which involves a highly-structured style of writing that requires students to identify, define, explain, apply, and leverage course concepts (Ruane & Chappell, 2017). Specifically, since the full IDEAL framework cannot be achieved in a few sentences, the three-sentence summary assignment promotes students' abilities to identify relevant course-related content within a given reading, summarize its key findings, and reflect on how course concepts can be applied to their future careers. Furthermore, research has shown that such reflective practices (i.e., self-reflection) facilitate student learning and have been associated with personal growth and change (Roebuck, Sigler, & Tyran, 2006; Tyran, 2017). Thus, the three-sentence summary facilitates student engagement while providing students with clear structure to aid in their writing efficacy and understanding of the material (Ruane & Chappell, 2017).

Learning Objectives

The main objective of this assignment is to facilitate reading comprehension by encouraging students to read an assigned article and to identify and summarize its main points. They will need to synthesize the entirety of the reading and reduce it to only two sentences. Additionally, students will learn to recognize the personal relevance of the reading and understand how it applies to their own future careers.

Assignment Overview

The premise of this assignment is simple: students write a three-sentence summary of the reading they completed for class. In this summary, the first two sentences are a concise summary of the main points of the article. In the third sentence, students state the importance and applicability of what they learned from the article to the “real business world.” In other words, how is this reading going to affect or change a student’s decisions and behavior in his/her business career?

The goals of this assignment are twofold. First, it is designed to increase student engagement with the material. As many of us instructors have trouble getting students to actually read their assigned readings, this is an easy way to ensure that they will do so. As a result, it also increases the quality of class discussions about the article. For this reason, we recommend that students submit the assignment prior to the start of class. Students can bring the assignment to class or turn it in online. Second, the assignment is designed to encourage students to think about the relevance of the reading to their own lives. While we, as instructors, can easily identify the important aspects of an article, students often view reading as “busy work” and may overlook the important takeaways from the article, and thus the entire reason why we assigned it! By having students reflect on the article and its personal importance and relevance to themselves, students may better see how the article and its related course concepts will affect their business decisions and behavior in the future. Furthermore, as students graduate and move on to their careers, they may not remember the details of every reading they completed during their education. It is unlikely that they would revisit a full article once they have graduated, but they may find value in a three-sentence summary that takes them only a minute to read. This may increase the potency of the article in affecting their future business career.

The authors piloted this activity by having students complete this assignment for every reading assigned throughout the course (excluding textbook chapters). We noticed a great improvement in the quality of the assignments over the duration of the course, with students honing their ability to identify the key points, summarize them, and recognize the relevance to their professional lives. We recommend grading this assignment with three points—one for each sentence. This puts some weight on the quality of the assignment rather than simply a completion grade, yet still keeps the grading very quick and simple for the instructor.

Session Description

We request a 30-minute session for this submission. For the first five minutes, we will introduce ourselves and our impetus for this activity (how do we get students to do their reading before class and how do we get them to remember and understand it?). We will spend the next five minutes discussing the activity and how to conduct it. We will then give attendees a chance to participate. We will provide a one-page article from Harvard Business Review (Ariely, 2010) and give attendees 10-minutes to create their own three-sentence summary. (The article takes approximately one to two minutes to read (See Appendix A)). For the final 10-minutes of the session, we will have attendees share their three-sentence summaries while we share student examples from the same article. Additionally, we will discuss any questions or other applications of this activity.

Timeline

Activity	Duration for 30-minute program
Welcome & introductions	5
Explanation of activity (theoretical foundation and learning objectives)	5
Distribution of article, attendees write their own three-sentence summary	10
Share three-sentence summary examples, tips, and best practices to ensure the activity is a success, Q&A	10
TOTAL	30

Appendix A. Article for Three-sentence Summary

See page 7.

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You Are What You Measure

A loose consensus has formed around the idea that basing CEO pay on, say, five years of stock returns would eliminate some of the reckless decision making that led to the Great Recession. But I suspect that even if you could build a compensation plan that focuses on long-term shareholder value, you'd solve only part of the problem.

That's because such a scheme still ties CEOs' motivation to one fickle number—company share price—and assumes that pay alone motivates chief executives to perform.

Any number of things can motivate CEOs—peer recognition, for example, and even a desire to change the world. In fact, CEOs usually have all the money they need. Why then does it seem that they care more about stock value and the compensation it produces than those other forms of motivation?

The answer is almost uncomfortably simple: CEOs care about stock value because that's how we measure them. If we want to change what they care about, we should change what we measure.

It can't be that simple, you might argue—but psychologists and economists will tell you it is. Human beings adjust behavior based on the metrics they're held against. Anything you measure will impel a person to optimize his score on that metric. What you measure is what you'll get. Period.

This phenomenon plays out time and again in research studies. Give someone frequent flyer miles, and he'll fly in absurd ways to optimize his miles.

When I was at MIT, I was measured on my ability to handle my yearly teaching load, using a complex equation of teaching points. The rating, devised to track performance on a variety of dimensions, quickly became an end in itself. Even though I enjoyed teaching, I found myself spending less time with students because I could earn more points doing other things. I began to scrutinize opportunities according to how many points were at stake. In optimiz-

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ing this measure, I was not striving to gain more wealth or happiness. Nor did I believe that earning the most points would result in more effective learning. It was merely the standard of measurement given to me, so I tried to do well against it (and I admit that I was rather good at it).

This phenomenon happens at an organizational level, too. States that use standardized education assessment tests produce kids who indeed perform well on these tests but falter when asked to demonstrate their knowledge of the same material in a different way. Does that make teachers bad at their jobs? No. They're simply behaving the way people do when they're judged on the basis of a metric.

So every morning, a CEO arrives in his office and checks the number he's judged on: the stock price. He'll meet with people who have ideas about how to make it higher. Now and again, he'll buy or sell something, or hire or fire some people, to move the number. All the while, analysts will keep watch, praising him when the number goes up and criticizing when it goes down. If you were subjected to such unrelenting scrutiny, wouldn't you do as much as you could to get the number up? Even if you knew your actions would probably come back to bite you in the long run?

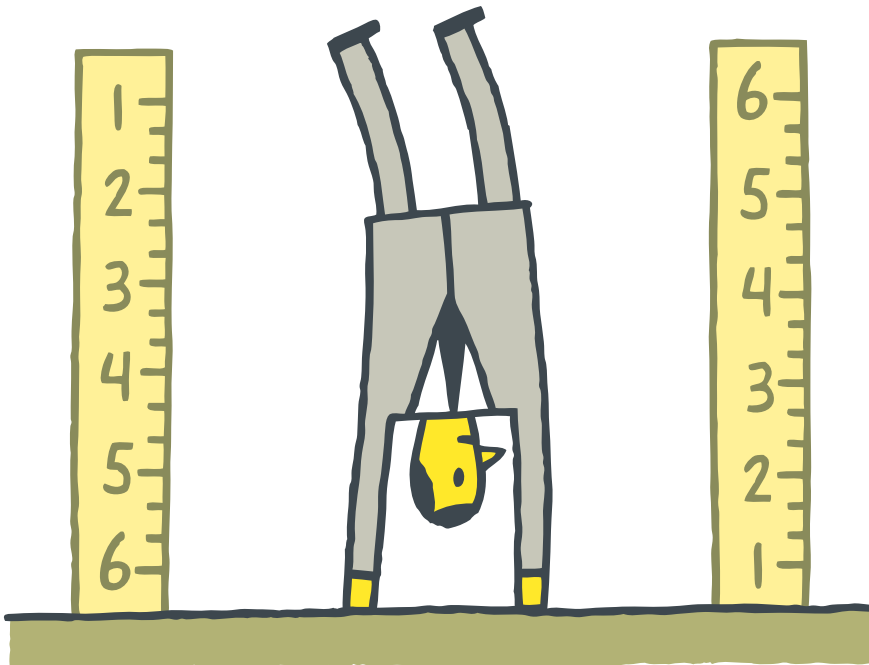
To change CEOs' behavior, we need to change the numbers we measure. Stock value metrics that focus on the long term are a start, but even more important are new numbers that direct leaders' attention to the real drivers of sustainable success.

What are those numbers? Ideally, they'd vary by industry, situation, and mission, but here are a few obvious choices: How many new jobs have been created at your firm? How strong is your pipeline of new patents? How satisfied are your customers? Your employees? What's the level of trust in your company and brand? How much carbon dioxide do you emit?

None of these metrics is as easy to measure as shareholder value. That's part of why we're so fixated on it. But if we measure just what's easy, we'll maximize just what's easy. ♡

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