Improving Article Summaries: Can a Brief Tutorial Help College Students Write More Effective Summaries?

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Introduction
The ability to read and understand research articles is critical for success as a psychology student. Producing an article summary is one strategy shown to be effective in helping students pick out important information, recognize the implications of results, and critically evaluate the arguments (Connor-Green & Green, 2002; Poe, 1990). However, this skill does not always come naturally, as research has repeatedly found markedly inadequate summary writing abilities in college students (Brown & Day, 1983; Conner-Green & Green, 2002).

Fortunately, this skill can be learned, and several studies have employed interventions which improved the summary writing abilities of participants (Ambruster, Anderson, & Ostertag, 1986; Poe, 1990).

The current study involved the use of a modified tutorial designed to help students write more effective research article summaries.

The Current Study
The goal of the current study is to further test the effectiveness of a brief tutorial in helping college students write more comprehensive article summaries. The tutorial focuses on guiding students towards identifying the hypotheses and related constructs, the operational definitions and how they were tested, the results of the study, and how the results support or fail to support the hypotheses.

Method
Participants
• 26 Undergraduate college students enrolled in an upper-level psychology lab course

Procedure
• Students asked to read two psychology research articles before class (homework assignment)
• Two class sections randomly assigned to experimental or control group

Experimental Group
• Completed tutorial and worksheet → Completed summaries of two articles

Control Group
• Completed summaries of two articles → Completed tutorial and worksheet

Example Response
Buck, Hillman, and Castelli (2007) examined the effects of aerobic fitness on interference control. Aerobic fitness was tested using the CARDIOGRAM test which assessed various aspects of physical fitness. The interference control was assessed using the Stroop Task test which asked participants to read words or ink colors in three various trials. Participants were asked to read out load the words or ink colors as fast they could without sacrificing the accuracy of the answers which help determine aerobic fitness levels. Results indicated that younger participants and those with lower IQ’s had lower accuracy rates; however, those with higher levels of aerobic fitness had higher accuracy levels during the Stroop task. The hypothesis was supported since those with better aerobic performance did have higher accuracy levels compared to those who had lower aerobic fitness.

Results

2 (Tutor) X 3 (Components) ANOVA
• Non-significant Tutor X Components interaction (F= 2.258, p=.116, partial η²=.086)
• Significant main effect of components (F= 17.966, p=.001, partial η²=.428)
• Non-significant main effect of components (F= 1.00, p=.327, partial η²=.040)

Conclusions
• The tutorial shows some success in improving students’ summaries
• Regardless of group, students performed best on methods
• Interest in science correlates with summary quality, although this may simply reflect more effort, versus an effect on actual ability

Limitations & Future Research
• Students who failed to read articles before class would not have had time to read and also write good summaries
• Future studies should ensure participants read articles, and explore other populations (graduate students; other majors)

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