

Magnet Summaries

Magnet Summaries help students with the difficult task of condensing and organizing information. The strategy offers several advantages.

- Students gain practice in translating key concepts into their own words.
- Students flesh out their understandings of key vocabulary and ideas.
- Students learn to identify main ideas and relate significant information to these ideas.
- Students are actively involved in constructing a meaningful synthesis of what they have read.
- Magnet summaries are appropriate for students from elementary age through high school and can be successfully used with materials in all content areas.
- Magnet summaries help readers synthesize stories and information.
- For additional teaching/learning activities that help students synthesize information, link to

Step 1: Introduce the idea of "magnet words" to the students. Draw on students' background knowledge. Begin by inquiring what effect a magnet has on metal. Just as magnets attract metal to them, magnet words attract information to them. Instruct students to read a short portion of their text assignment, looking for a key term or concept that the details in the passage seem to "stick" to. When they have finished reading, solicit possible magnet words from the students. Comment that most of the information in the section is connected to the magnet word. Note that magnet words frequently appear in titles or headings or may be highlighted in the text in bold or italic print. Caution, however, that all words in bold or italic are not necessarily magnet words.

Step 2: Next, write the magnet word on the chalkboard or overhead transparency. Ask the students to recall some of the important details from the passage that are connected to the magnet word. As you write these items around the magnet word, have the students follow the same procedure on a 3 x 5 card. Allow the students a second look at the passage to include any important details that may have been missed.

Step 3: The students are now ready to complete their reading of the entire text passage. Distribute three to four additional 3 x 5 cards to each student for recording the magnet words from the remaining material. For younger students, indicate that they should identify a magnet word for each paragraph or section following a heading.

Step 4: In cooperative groups, have the students decide upon the best magnet words for the remaining cards. Then have them generate

the important details for each magnet word. When the groups are finished, each student will have four to five cards, each with a magnet word and key related information.

Step 5: Next model for the students how the information on one of the cards can be organized and combined into a sentence that sums up that passage of the text. The magnet word should occupy a central place in the sentence. Note that some of the details may not be as important as others and will be omitted from the sentence. Have students return to their cooperative groups and construct a sentence which summarizes each of their remaining cards. Urge students to try to combine the information into one sentence, although on occasion it may be necessary to come up with two sentences for a particular card. Have them work out their sentences on scratch paper first. Then the final version of each sentence is written on the back of the appropriate card, and the magnet words are underlined.

Step 6: Finally, direct the students to arrange the sentences in the order they wish their summary to read. At this point, the sentences will need to be altered so they flow smoothly from one to the other. Model inserting additional language that integrates the sentences into a summary. At this point students should also judge whether all important ideas are included, and whether anything further can be deleted. Students then test their summaries by listening to how they sound when they are read aloud. The following Magnet Summary for a history passage on Life in Great Plains in the 1880's is an example:

"Many people went west because of the ***Homestead Act***, which gave 160 acres to people if they farmed them for 5 years. But in the Great Plains, people had ***hardships*** from the very hot and very cold weather, and their crops failed due to drought and insects. Therefore farmers needed to do ***dry farming***, so they dug wells, made windmills, and changed the way they plowed to grow wheat. The farmers' ***homes on the prairie*** were sod houses, called 'soddies,' because there were no trees. The people were lonely because the houses were far from each other."