

## Teaching Students to Interpret

By Dr. John D. Eigenauer

[jeigenauer@yahoo.com](mailto:jeigenauer@yahoo.com)

- Interpretation is the act of extracting intended and essential meaning from information.
- Interpretation is an acquired skill: interpretive skills can be learned, taught, and improved upon.
- Most teachers would be happy if a student could read a passage and express its intended and essential meaning in his own words.
- If a student cannot interpret effectively and correctly, it is the teacher's job to train the student to do so.
- Training should consist of teaching a student how to extract the intended and essential meaning from a given passage.
- Training involves:
  - Incremental practice
  - Repetition
  - Feedback (correction, guidance, suggestions for improvement)
  - Increased ability to self-evaluate
- The first step (using simple statements) is to get students to ask consistently the question: "What is the author saying?" Practically, this means:
  - Use argument maps.
  - Identify the conclusion first. (This is the point that the author is trying to make, or holding up as true.) Students may put this conclusion in their own words.
  - Identify the premises that support the conclusion.
  - Put the premises in an order that follows logically.
- Students will need much practice with simple arguments (1-3 sentences).
- Practical training steps with articles (rather than sentences):
  - Provide students with a written article.
  - Ask students to use an argument map to map the article first. This will be the first step toward summarizing the article.
  - Ask students to express the single main point of the article. (This is the "conclusion".)
  - Discuss within class the various suggestions for "main points" with the intent of selecting which suggestion is best.
  - Ask the students to express the supporting points of the article. (These are the premises of the argument map).
  - Ask the students to organize the premises.
  - Students are now prepared to write a summary from an argument map.
  - Once finished, provide students with a model summary.
  - Ask students to compare their work with the model summary.
  - Discuss the differences between their work and the model summary.
  - When teaching the students how to create the written expression of the argument map, list specific practices that should be avoided:
    - Excessive quotation.
    - Repeated use of the same words that are in the article.
    - Excessive focus on details (support arguments and data).
  - Show examples of:
    - Excessive quotation.
    - Repeated use of the same words that are in the article.
    - Excessive focus on details (support arguments and data).
  - Repeat the practice with other articles of similar theme and difficulty.
  - Increase the length and difficulty of the articles presented.
  - Demonstrate to the students exactly how their work improves over the course of time.
  - Repeat this exercise as many times as possible throughout the semester.