

I sometimes think that a healthy reading habit in a 10-year-old contributes more to educational outcomes than any other factor. Of course it would be a simple task to measure this by exam results, but really, the benefits go a lot further than school achievements and job prospects – reading builds a person’s inner life and widens perceptions.

However, let’s narrow our horizons for a minute. Whilst reading is definitely a huge contributory factor in 11+/ common entrance exam success, there are plenty of other specific literacy skills that are essential when it comes to applying that freshly sharpened pencil to the comprehension paper in the exam room.

Literacy for comprehension can be broken down into a series of skills: inference, looking for information, word meaning from context, prediction, summary and several more. Each skill can be honed. If you have ever wondered why with each past paper your child attempts the marks don’t substantially improve, it is perhaps because they are making similar mistakes each time. Isolating these skills away from the past papers is not only more challenging and fun, it is less repetitive and allows the pupil to build up abstract skills that are essential for GCSE, A-Level, university and beyond.

In a series of blogs for Tavistock I will be outlining just what those skills are and how a parent, even without the help of a teacher or tutor, can work on them. Remember, you never stop improving these skills and adults may find them useful for their own lives.

How was your day?

One of the skills tested on every single comprehension paper is the *summary*. The good news is that children practice this skill every single day of their lives. Simply by answering the question: *how was your day at school today?* Your child is offering up a summary of that day’s events, even if the answer is simply “fine”! Of course, there are more garrulous examples, but just look at the skills needed to answer that question in the first place:

- **A sense of chronology**– events described may not be in the order in which they happened.
- **Event selection**– no one is going to explain *everything* that happened – events are selected by assessing their relative merits.
- **Describing**– if they have been somewhere new they may need to set the scene.
- **Characterising**– they may have to use reported speech, in other words, they might have to repeat what someone said to them and characterize their emotional intent.

Of course, this will all be done unconsciously, but don’t be fobbed off with that brief ‘fine’ – take your time and allow them to express themselves. This is sometimes easier said than done, and you want to avoid an inquisition. That’s why dinner around the table is a great place for a relaxed conversation. Ask plenty of follow up questions.

A digested read

One of the most impressive things I have ever seen happened some while back when a lawyer I knew was a weekend guest. He had warned me that he had a bit of work to do, but said he didn’t mind if I stayed in the room whilst he did it. He then took out a thick A4 manual that must have been at least 500 pages. Now, I have no idea what this brick-heavy volume was about, but for the next 30 minutes my friend briskly flicked through the book, mostly

forward, but occasionally tracking back. At the same time, by scribbling quickly in pencil, he filled 10 pages of lined A4 paper.

At the end of the 30 minutes I asked him what he had been doing. He said he had condensed the thick volume to just 10 pages and had extracted all the crucial information. He wasn't an expert, but he now was sufficiently versed in the subject to be able to talk with a degree of authority in the meeting he had on Monday morning. What was so impressive was the efficiency with which he worked.

Similarly, when it comes to the exam, scanning the text and locating the appropriate paragraph with which to answer the question is a vital ability to have. For example, at random, here are some questions from recent exam papers:

- In no more than four sentences explain what is happening in this extract. (2 marks)
- Describe what happens in paragraph one in your own words. (2 marks)
- Outline the events that led up to the car crash (4 marks)

Skills games to play at home

- Take a 250-word article from a newspaper, a specific set of instructions from a DIY manual, or a brief chapter from something like a book on British wildlife. Give your child 5 minutes or so to read it and then ask them to summarise it. Follow this up with a series of specific questions designed to see if they have understood it.
- Think of an everyday task they are familiar with – nothing complicated, just something we never really think about like eating an ice cream or making a cup of tea. Ask your child to describe it. The odds are they will miss out a stage or two, for example, what happens when you have licked the ice cream down to the water level. When do you start to bite into the cone? The summary should be succinct.
- Scanning for words. Take a 500-word text and ask them to read it. Then, tell them you are going to pick a unique word from the text and their job is to find it as quickly as possible. In order to do this properly they will need a technique – it is no good just searching desperately across the page.

Examine how other people summarise. Watching the news is always a good thing when you are young (however, as an adult it becomes increasingly bad for your blood pressure). The news is supposed to be the perfect summary of events. When the craft of summary becomes part of your muscle memory it is so much easier to answer tricky little comprehension questions.

The ability to summarize is an important skill. Can you extract the important information from the passages below and summarize them in two lines? Remember to only give the essential information.

On 29th March 1974 farmers digging a water well in Shaanxi Province, China made a startling discovery. What was unearthed were the remnants of a vast terracotta army depicting the armies of the First Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang.

The figures varied in height and were made up of over 8000 soldiers, 150 cavalry horses and 500 horses with chariots. Other figures found in the pit included strongmen, acrobats, and musicians, all hand-molded in terracotta.

The First Emperor had been buried with the figures, which were life size, and manufactured in workshops by government labourers and craftsmen using local materials. Many of the soldiers' original weapons had rotted or away or been looted, but most of Qin Shia Huang's bizarre burial companions remained intact.

Summary:

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The Grey Wolf (*Canis lupus*), also known as the timber wolf or western wolf is native to remote areas of North American, Eurasian and African wilderness.

Its closest relative is the domestic dog until they diverged 14,900 years ago. It is a social animal, and travels in packs that consist of a mated pair and offspring.

The males average 43-45 kg and females 36-38.5 kg. Its winter fur is long and bushy, and grey in colour, although other colours do occur.

Only humans and tigers pose a serious threat to the wolf, which feeds primarily on cattle and deer, although it also eats smaller animals and livestock.

Although there has traditionally been a fear of the wolf in many human societies, most recorded attacks on people have come from wolves suffering from rabies. Non-rabid wolves have attacked people, but this is unusual, as wolves live away from people and have come to fear humans as a result of hunting.

Summary:

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A 25 year old woman was taking her pet parrot for a stroll in the park yesterday when a man made an attempt to grab her bag. Wunsy, an African Grey Parrot, immediately came to her rescue, flapping his wings and squawking, which startled the man to such an extent that he was last seen running towards the Great North Road.

Neither woman nor parrot were hurt and police are today appealing for information about the attack which took place at 12:30pm on Friday. PC Chris Cutmore of Colindale Police Station said; "This was a random attack on a woman walking out of a park. Although the parrot Wunsy came to her rescue, we are obviously very keen to trace the suspect and prevent him from attacking anyone else."

Police are searching for a white man, 25-35 with short fair hair. The African Grey Parrot is said to be the best mimics of all parrots and are often able to associate words with meanings.

Summary:

Summarize the main points of the following passage.

Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house.

It was a very old house - it had an attic under the roof and a cellar under the ground and an overgrown garden with huge old trees in it.

Coraline's family didn't own all of the house, it was too big for that. Instead they owned part of it. There were other people who lived in the old house.

Miss Spink and Miss Forcible lived in the flat below Coraline's, on the ground floor. They were both old and round, and they lived in their flat with a number of ageing highland terriers who had names like Hamish and Andrew and Jock. Once upon a time Miss Spink and Miss Forcible had been actresses, as Miss Spink told Coraline the first time she met her.

"You see, Caroline," Miss Spink said, getting Coraline's name wrong, "Both myself and Miss Forcible were famous actresses, in our time. We trod the boards, luvvy. Oh, don't let Hamish eat the fruit cake, or he'll be up all night with his tummy."

"It's Coraline. Not Caroline. Coraline," said Coraline.

In the flat above Coraline's, under the roof, was a crazy old man with a big moustache. He told Coraline that he was training a mouse circus. He wouldn't let anyone see it.

"One day, little Caroline, when they are all ready, everyone in the whole world will see the wonders of my mouse circus. You ask me why you cannot see it now. Is that what you asked me?"

"No," said Coraline quietly, "I asked you not to call me Caroline. It's Coraline."

"The reason you cannot see the Mouse Circus," said the man upstairs, "is that the mice are not yet ready and rehearsed. Also, they refuse to play the songs I have written for them. All the songs I have written for the mice to play go oompah oompah. But the white mice will only play toodle oodle, like that. I am thinking of trying them on different types of cheese."

Coraline didn't think there really was a mouse circus. She thought the old man was probably making it up.

The day after they moved in, Coraline went exploring.

She explored the garden. It was a big garden: at the very back was an old tennis court, but no-one in the house played tennis and the fence around the court had holes in it and the net had mostly rotted away; there was an old rose garden, filled with stunted, flyblown rose-bushes; there was a rockery that was all rocks; there was a fairy ring, made of squidgy brown toadstools which smelled dreadful if you accidentally trod on them.

From 'Coraline' by Neil Gaiman

Summary:

Summarize the main points of the following passage.

More than 1,000 people are expected to take part in youth homeless charity Centrepoin't's *Sleep Out in south London*, a record breaking figure for the annual fundraising event.

Spending a night in sleeping bags on cardboard boxes, exposed to the elements on a site on the Greenwich Peninsula, they will get a glimpse of life for those who sleep rough in the capital.

As part of our Christmas Appeal, it is hoped the London Sleep Out will raise £450,000 to help launch the Centrepoin't helpline and fund the charity's other vital services for homeless young people.

Actress and fashion designer Sadie Frost, Princess Diana's niece Lady Kitty Spencer, James Bond star Colin Salmon, actress Lisa Maxwell, and double Olympic gold rowing medallist Alex Gregory are among those taking part.

Participants will be treated to dinner served by the RAF and a bedtime story from entertainer Christopher Biggins before bedding down under a giant marquee. Brisk winds and predicted 4C temperatures promise to make it an uncomfortable night for those taking part.

Centrepoin't ambassador and BBC Radio 2 DJ Sara Cox, who is taking part in her seventh Sleep Out, said: "It's a really important event to bring people together raise the issues about homelessness.

"It will never replicate homelessness, but even the glimpse that we get enforces how difficult the situation is that people find themselves in.

"Physically, we are uncomfortable and cold but we know it is one night only and we will be returning to our warm beds. People have to remember there are so many reasons people can end up homeless, things like family breakdown and it's not the young person's fault."

The Standard's Young and Homeless Helpline appeal is raising money to help Centrepoin't launch a much-needed freephone number and online service.

"For the young people it helps, Centrepoin't isn't just a shelter. It's a way forward in life, a turning point. They are taught everything, from budgeting to how to prepare for a job interview. They are encouraged to follow their dreams.

"The helpline would be great. Just to have someone to talk to for anyone going through such hard times can be a lifeline."

Summary:

The ability to summarize is an important skill. Can you extract the important information from the passages below and summarize them in two lines? Remember to only give the essential information.

Weddings are so much fun, and people do tend to come out of the woodwork offering to help – parents, bridesmaids, cousins, neighbours, and so on, as everyone is drawn in by the excitement. Hiring a professional wedding planner can sometimes seem unnecessary with all this free help around!

We get clients from all walks of life, but quite often we see full time working professionals, who work long hours, like lawyers, doctors and entrepreneurs. They have a lot of ideas and want to be involved, they just don't want every second of their non-working hours to be consumed by wedding planning, so they want a planner to help streamline the process.

We always say that the clients get to do the fun stuff and we do the rest.

We explain that a planner isn't there to impose their will and taste on the bride, but rather to advise, guide, inspire and most importantly to do the behind the scenes work involved with making the vision into a reality. We definitely have our brides be central to the design process; we brainstorm and generate ideas with them, not for them.

We encourage them to find photos (on Pinterest, blogs, in magazines) that have elements that they like and then we curate their ideas into a cohesive look & aesthetic. We'll then find the vendors that are best suited to execute that vision,

Our favourite part of décor is in translating personalities and tastes into the physical realm.

Then in general you just want to assess whether you 'click' with them. You are going to spend a lot of time together and communicating so you want to feel like this is someone you can be natural with and who you feel is genuine and easy to talk to you for you. There are a lot of different great planners in this city so don't settle if you feel at all awkward, there will be one that's just right for you!

Couples can often get really caught up in fretting about the little details in each decision. We try to always relate each decision back to the overall question of "how will this affect my guests experience?" which helps to make sure that the money you spend has the most impact on the people you love. How much you spent on a place card probably won't affect the guests as much as what you choose to do for food or music.

Summary:

Summarize the main points of the following passage.

Exam fear is stressful for children. Often they may suffer from nerves and hence their exam performance is affected.

Here are a few tips and tricks to overcome examination fear:

1. **Do it now rather than delay:** Don't delay your studies for the next day. Revise what is taught in the class daily to make it easier. Revising the chapters daily will spare you from a load of the burden during exams and you can relax and learn important things instead of getting confused.
2. **Routine Life helps always:** Make a routine to study daily. Plan the subjects and take some time for the daily assignments and learn whatever is being taught in class. Divide the subjects equally in the routine to go through all of them once in a week.
3. **Self-assessment a must:** Examination fear haunts everyone. One should learn to face the fear and go for self-examination. Assign a weekly test for yourself and prepare a question paper much ahead or ask your friends or family members to do it for you. Answer the test papers without cheating and check yourself to analyse where you are lacking. This will help to cover the topics which need more attention.
4. **Highlight the Important:** Take some colourful markers and highlight the important points in your notebook. These points can be later revised to give you a gist of the whole topic. It will be easier to read the highlighted parts rather than going through the whole book again before the exams.
5. **Notes and Shortcuts:** Instead of investing time in preparing cheats for the exams, you should prepare notes of the tough topics. Summarize the topics as per your understanding and use the shortest words and phrases to recall it in the examination hall. You can compare it with a song or make abbreviations to memorize it easily.
6. **Plan group studies:** Friend in need is a friend indeed. Plan group studies once in a week and pick one topic each to revise and explain to others. This will help you to learn the topic easily and also other topics which your friends have learned to explain you.
7. **Don't hesitate to ask help:** Ask your teachers, family members or your friends to help you on the topics which you are not able to understand. Don't hesitate or feel shy to ask your doubts. This extra teaching of the lesson will help you grab it more easily and you will understand it thoroughly.
8. **Concentrate and Meditate:** When you are in class, listen to every lesson with concentration. Don't lose your focus.
9. **Eat healthy food:** Studying for exams is important but you also need to take care of proper diet to stay healthy. Avoid junk foods. Eat healthy and balanced diet to stay fit.
10. **Stay fit and physically active:** Being lazy will also make your brain lazy and dull. It will thus result in your studies. You will feel sleepy and lethargic to open your books and revise for examinations. Do a bit of exercise daily to be physically active and fit. Along with brain exercises, even your body needs exercise to boost your concentration power.

A student has to overcome his examination on his own at the end with his will and capabilities. A better guidance will help him to cross the hurdles easily but he has to take his final steps to score well. Negativity should not haunt you before the examinations. A positive approach towards examinations will help you get positive results.

Summary:

The ability to summarize is an important skill. Can you extract the important information from the passages below and summarize them in four lines? Remember to only give the essential information.

THERE was a woman who lived near Cheadle, who went to the mill one day to get a bag of flour for baking, and as she came back she met an old witch.

"Good day," said the witch.

"Good day," said the woman again.

"What's that you've got on your head?" said the witch.

"It's flour I'm taking home for my baking," said the woman.

"It isn't flour, it's manure," said the witch.

"It's sound flour!" said the woman; "I've fetched it straight from the mill, and I'm going to bake with it as soon as ever I get home."

"It's nothing at all but a bag of manure," said the witch, and off she went.

Now the woman knew very well that it was flour she had in her bag, but this made her feel so uncomfortable, that as soon as the witch was out of sight, she put down the bag off her head and opened it and looked in. And there, sure enough, it was not flour at all, nothing but manure! Well she thought, as she had carried it so far, she might as well carry it all the way, so she took it up again, and went home and set it down by the pig-sty.

In the evening her husband came home.

"Whatever have you put that bag of flour down by the pig-sty for?" he said, as soon as he came into the house.

"Oh," said she, "that's not flour, that's only a bag of manure."

"Nonsense!" said he, "what are you talking of? I tell you it's flour. Why, it's sheeding [spilling] all over the place!"

So they went to look, and there actually it was flour again the same as at first; and they took it into the house, and very glad the woman was to get it back. And that was the only thing the witch was ever known to turn [transform] back again. She turnee a many things but never a one back again but that.

Summary:

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The Dalton, near Thirsk, in Yorkshire, is a mill. It has quite recently been rebuilt; but when I was at Dalton, six years ago, the old building stood. In front of the house was a long mound, which went by the name of "the giant's grave," and in the mill was shown a long blade of iron something like a scythe-blade, but not curved, which was said to have been the giant's knife. A curious story was told of this knife.

There lived a giant at this mill, and he ground men's bones to make his bread. One day he captured a lad on Pilmoor, and instead of grinding him in the mill he kept him as his servant, and never let him get away. Jack served the giant many years, and never was allowed a holiday. At last he could bear it no longer. Topcliffe Fair was coming on, and the lad entreated that he might be allowed to go there to see the lasses and buy some spice.

The giant surlily refused leave: Jack resolved to take it.

The day was hot, and after dinner the giant lay down in the mill with his head on a sack and dozed. He had been eating in the mill, and had laid down a great loaf of bone bread by his side, and the knife was in his hand, but his fingers relaxed their hold of it in sleep. Jack seized the moment, drew the knife away, and holding it with both his hands drove the blade into the single eye of the giant, who woke with a howl of agony, and starting up barred the door.

Jack was again in difficulties, but he soon found a way out of them. The giant had a favourite dog, which had also been sleeping when his master was blinded. Jack killed the dog, skinned it, and throwing the hide over his back ran on all-fours barking between the legs of the giant, and so escaped.

Summary:

The ability to summarize is an important skill. Can you extract the important information from the passages below and summarize them in two lines? Remember to only give the essential information.

One golden afternoon on 4 July 1862, Charles Dodgson, an Oxford don, took the 10-year-old Alice Liddell and her sisters on a boating picnic up the River Thames from Folly Bridge in Oxford. To amuse the children he told them a story about a little girl, sitting bored by a riverbank, who finds herself tumbling down a rabbit hole into a topsy-turvy world called Wonderland. The story so delighted Alice that she begged him to write it down – the result was the 1864 handwritten manuscript *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*.

This original manuscript, which was prepared as a gift for Alice Liddell, is now in the British Library and is available to view on their website. The following year the manuscript was published as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* under the pen name Lewis Carroll, with illustrations by Sir John Tenniel. A sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass*, was published in 1871.

Alice's Day commemorates an important moment for children's literature and for Oxford. Alice became one of the most popular, most widely quoted and most widely translated children's book ever written, with editions even in Esperanto and shorthand. It marked the birth of modern children's literature. After Alice, children's books became less stuffy and more entertaining. Oxford became a world centre of children's stories and inspirational home to many authors and illustrators including Kenneth Grahame, CS Lewis, JRR Tolkien and Philip Pullman.

Summary:
