
Virginia Commonwealth Literacy Assessment (VCLA) Summary Task

Overview

The VCLA summary task asks you to summarize an informational or persuasive passage of 500 – 700 words into a passage of 150 – 200 words. Your summary should use your own words to convey the passage's main idea and essential points clearly and concisely. The test administrators recommend that you devote about 45 minutes to this task.

Features of a well-formed VCLA summary

- The summary represents, in your own words, the original passage's essential content, meaning, and point of view. The summary should not distort or misrepresent the ideas or perspective in the original passage, and you should not substitute your own ideas or opinions for the original passage's.
- The summary should be organized to convey the original passage's main ideas and logical structure. The VCLA practice-test materials ("process and hints" section) recommend that you retain the original passage's sequence of information.
- The summary should have appropriate length and detail to convey the original passage's essential content, meaning, and point of view.
- The summary should use the spelling, punctuation, capitalization, word choice, and sentence structures of Standard English.

A few features to notice

- Unlike a college-level summary, your VCLA summary does not need to acknowledge the author of the original passage. In other words, your summary does not have to acknowledge that it is a summary.
- A college-level summary would not necessarily retain the original article's or book's sequence of points, but some VCLA test prep materials recommend that you do so.
- The summary must be composed in your own words. That is, you must summarize or paraphrase the material in the passage; you cannot copy and paste it into your summary.

A process for generating the summary

1. Read the passage through for its meaning, and compose a statement that expresses its main point or idea. Be sure to use your own words.
2. Do a quick reverse-outline of the passage. Jot down the key topic or point(s) of each paragraph.
3. Re-read the passage paragraph by paragraph, and jot down the essential ideas, keeping the paragraph's topic or main point in mind.
4. Draft your summary from your jotted notes.
5. Examine and revise your draft for logical flow. *Many VCLA test prep materials recommend that you keep the sequence of points as they appear in the original passage, but you can rearrange them if doing so*

creates better logical flow. Your statement of the main point does not need to go at the very beginning of your summary.

6. Group your statements into paragraphs as seems appropriate (*your summary may have fewer paragraphs than the original passage does*). Add transitions to express logical connections between paragraphs and sentences.
7. Check your word count, then add or delete details as necessary. Edit for mechanical correctness.

A sample original passage and summary:

Sample original passage

One of the most familiar episodes in Virginia's early history is the story of Pocahontas rescuing John Smith. As Smith related the tale, he was about to be executed by the Powhatans when the chief's daughter halted the proceeding by laying her head across his. According to Smith, Pocahontas was motivated by compassion for him and saved his life at great risk to her own. For centuries, historians took the adventurer at his word, at times giving the story a romantic cast. More recently, however, scholars have reexamined Smith's words and other evidence related to the event. Although the "rescue" doubtlessly took place, many believe that Smith's life was never actually in danger.

Smith is one of the more colorful personalities in American history. That the Virginia Company's Jamestown settlement survived its precarious early years owed much to his leadership. The globe-trotting son of a Lincolnshire yeoman, Smith was a larger-than-life figure who had fought in various European wars and had no hesitation about assuming command of the floundering settlement when he saw it headed for extinction. In addition to supervising the construction of houses and the planting of crops, he took charge of efforts to obtain needed food supplies from Native Americans. He also explored the surrounding rivers and forests to learn what he could about the region. On one such expedition in late 1607, he was captured by Algonkian deer hunters, who held him for several weeks before presenting him to their leader, Powhatan. An elaborate feast followed, after which Smith was made to lie across two flat stones as men with clubs circled his prostrate body. It was then that Pocahontas intervened on his behalf.

There is no reason to doubt that Smith thought the Powhatans intended to kill him. He knew little about their customs and could only explain his rescue in terms that made sense from an English cultural perspective. That his ordeal was part of a ritual probably never occurred to him. But historians who have begun to reexamine the past from the viewpoint of Native Americans now believe that is exactly what happened. They argue that Smith's near execution represented a symbolic enactment of his death. He was then brought back from the grave by one of its members. Smith's status as a leader and representative of the Jamestown colonists would have warranted such treatment. And two days after this ceremony took place, another was held in which Powhatan told Smith that he would always consider him a son. For many native groups, such ritual adoptions served as a prelude to the creation of intertribal alliances. This appears to be what the chief had in mind. Smith's acceptance into the Powhatan family was to be the basis for establishing closer relations between Native Americans and the fledgling settlement at Jamestown.

There is much in Smith's writing that raises questions about his veracity, and it is not surprising that he has been accused of fabricating and romanticizing his experiences with the Powhatans. But the story he related most likely took place. What he did not record, and probably did not understand, was what it meant. It would be another three and a half centuries or so before historians started asking the questions that would supply that meaning. (545 words)

Sample summary response:

Many have heard the story of Pocahontas' dramatic intervention to save John Smith's life. While the episode probably occurred, scholars have recently given it a different interpretation, saying Smith's life was not actually in jeopardy.

John Smith was a well-traveled adventurer whose leadership of the Jamestown settlement during its precarious early years probably saved the colony from extinction. One of the memorable episodes of

Smith's Virginia years was his rescue by Pocahontas, the daughter of a Powhatan chief, who laid her head across his as he was about to be executed by tribal warriors.

For many years, scholars accepted Smith's account of the incident. Recently, however, historians reexamining the past from the perspective of Native Americans have proposed an alternative explanation that Smith may not have been aware of. They believe the Powhatans had no intention of killing Smith, and that his ordeal was part of a tribal adoption ritual. According to this interpretation, Smith's near execution represented a symbolic enactment of his death, from which he was afterward "reborn" into the tribe. By making Smith a member of the Powhatan family, these historians contend, Native Americans hoped to establish closer relations with the English settlement at Jamestown. (198 words)

Notice that the summary follows the sequence of information of the original passage, conveying the main ideas of each paragraph, in order.

VCLA criteria for scoring your summary

Your summary should effectively communicate the main idea and essential points of the passage. You are expected to identify the relevant information and communicate it clearly and concisely in your own words.

Your summary will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- **FIDELITY:** Fidelity is the extent to which the response accurately and clearly represents in your own words the essential meaning, content, and point of view of the original passage.
- **CONCISENESS:** Conciseness is the extent to which the response is of appropriate length, depth, and specificity to convey the essential meaning, content, and point of view of the original passage.
- **ORGANIZATION:** Organization is the extent to which your sequencing and paragraphing of ideas convey the essential meaning, logical structure, and point of view of the original passage.
- **MECHANICS, GRAMMAR, AND WORD CHOICE:** Mechanics, grammar, and word choice are the extent to which words are spelled correctly and your writing follows the conventions of punctuation and capitalization; the effectiveness of the sentence structure and the extent to which the sentences are free of structural errors; and the extent to which your writing shows care and precision in word choice and is free of usage errors.

The final version of your summary should conform to the conventions of Standard English, should be written legibly, and should be in your own words.

Acknowledgements and Sources:

Sample essay and scoring features from the VCLA Study Guide, Section 6:

https://www.va.nesinc.com/PageView.aspx?f=HTML_FRAG/VA091_092PrepMaterials.html

Additional information drawn from email correspondence with Virginia's Pearson liaison and from the VCLA Online Course and Preparation Tests: <https://www.longsdalepub.com/courses/vcla/start/index.html> (login required)