
UNIT 4 MAKING EFFECTIVE SUMMARIES

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall take up passages and show you how they can be summarized. This unit will help you write summaries of passages by giving you practice in:

- separating essential from non-essential ideas,
- separating details from ideas,
- removing repetition or restatement making use of grammatical features to determine the importance of the ideas being presented,
- giving importance to the words which link sentences and ideas, and
- becoming aware of how ideas in a passage are systematically linked to each other.

After you have worked through the unit, you should be able to perform all the tasks indicated above and write effective summaries.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Of all the writing we have discussed so far, note making and summary writing may well be the ones you are most expected to do in your academic life as a student and as a researcher.

In fact, we are summarizing information all the time. We watch a movie and tell our friends the story in two minutes, we listen to long conversations and say, "So what you are actually saying is..." Think of a long newspaper report running into three columns, but with a neat five-word headline which summarizes the entire report. Summaries may involve one or two key words, a line, or it may be quite an elaborate write-up. It all depends on the purpose of the writing.

Why do we summarize what we read? Most often we summarize what others have said. We use this material for future reference. It forms an essential part of our preparation for an exam,

a class discussion, a presentation, writing of projects, research papers and term papers. In this unit we will look at ways in which we can condense information in a long text.

As students, you are expected to read and remember large amounts of prose. In many of your college courses, you are probably able to memorize facts and key statements with relative ease, but at times you are expected to go a step further, i.e., read critically and closely so as to present the argument or information of an article in as cogent a form as possible and in your own words. In order to demonstrate that you have understood the main idea of a text you must be able to paraphrase, summarize, and even compose a precis of the text.

4.2 PARAGRAPH, PRECISE AND SUMMARY

Let us first explain these three terms - paraphrase, precis and summary.

To paraphrase is to rewrite something using different words without changing the original meaning: this is what is usually meant by the phrase, 'in your own words.' The paraphrase is usually clearer and more easily understood than the original, and is usually similar in length to the original. The purpose of a paraphrase is to convey the meaning of the original message and, in doing so, to prove that we have understood the passage well enough to restate it in our own words.

The **precis** is derived from the word 'precise'. A precis usually reduces the length of the original passage by at least two-thirds. Every important idea must be retained, preferably in the order in which it appears in the original.

A **summary** is much shorter than the original text, and communicates the main idea of the text and the supporting points written again 'in one's own words'. The summary should give someone who has not read the original a clear and accurate overview of the text. Writing a summary therefore requires a combination of précis writing ability and the ability to paraphrase.

4.3 WRITING SUMMARIES

4.3.1 The art of condensation

One of the skills required to write precis and summaries is using concise language. Before practicing writing summaries, let us look at how we can say and write sentences in brief.

Writers often load their prose with extra words or phrases that do not seem to add to the meaning of the sentence. Although such words and phrases are meaningful in the appropriate context, they can easily be left out. We can **eliminate these unnecessary word and phrases**. For instance:

- Completing the project proposal by June 10 is an impossibility without some kind of extra help.
- For all purposes, American industrial productivity generally depends on certain factors that are really more psychological in kind than of any given technological aspect.

A more concise version is:

- Completing the project proposal by June 10 is impossible without help.
- American industrial productivity depends more on psychological than on technological factors.

A single word can sometimes replace a phrase. Therefore, we can **convert phrases into single words** whenever possible. Often, adjectival or adverbial phrases can be replaced with a single adjective or adverb. For example:

- He is never late and is always on time.

He is *punctual*.

- The employee with ambition ... (= the *ambitious* employee)
- The department showing the best performance ... (= The *best-performing* department...)
- The company buys compressors from other countries (= The company *imports* compressors).
- Do you think you are incapable of making mistakes? (= Do you think you are *infallible*?)

Check Your Progress 1

A. Find single words for the phrases in italics and rewrite the sentences making appropriate changes wherever necessary.

- The company *buys compressors from other countries*.
- The theory can be *checked to see whether it is true and accurate*.
- Jack is a person *who can do many different things*. He is quite talented.
- The man is *expected to become the next CEO* of the company.
- Pollution can *make his asthma become unpleasant and worse*.
- The case resulted in *a court decision that he was not guilty*.
- The company decided *to officially settle the disagreement* between the two state government offices.
- He thought his theory *did not have any mistakes*.

Using a clause to convey meaning that could be presented in a phrase or even a word contributes to wordiness. We can therefore **convert modifying clauses into phrases or single words** where possible.

- The report, which was released recently ... (= the recently released report)
- All applicants who are interested in the job must ... (all job applicants)
- The system that is most efficient and accurate ... (=the most efficient and accurate system)

Writing that focuses directly on a point and maximizes meaning with minimum wordiness tends to be both clear and concise. Revising for clarity of meaning often makes the writing more concise. Read this sentence:

- The cause of the failure of our schools to teach basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning.

Now read the revised sentence:

- Our schools fail to teach basic skills because they do not understand how cultural backgrounds influence learning

Check Your Progress 2

Rewrite the sentences to make them more concise.

- 1 My suggestion is that we make alteration in the length of the cloak.
- 2 Everything today has the requirement of the conformity of people to some standard.
3. A revision of the programme will result in increase in our efficiency in the servicing of our customers.
4. Many engineering personnel have made comments regarding a lack of knowledge about what new information is available in the library, as literature is filed into the library without any sort of notification.

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When we combine ideas and sentences in a clause, we reduce the length of the sentence and text significantly. Read these two versions:

- A. There is a beautiful park near my house. The name of the park is Tian-Tan Park. This was built several hundred years ago. It is the biggest park in Beijing. The Tian-Tan Park is famous not only for its beauty but its quietness as well. (46 words).
- B. Near my house stands Tian-Tan, the biggest park in Beijing, built several hundred years ago and is now famous not only for its beauty but its peaceful atmosphere too. (28 words)

However, it is better to write short sentences that are correct and well formulated than long sentences that are harder to understand.

4.3.2 Identifying the topic sentence

A paragraph is a group of sentences related to a particular topic, or central theme. Every paragraph has a key concept or main idea. The main idea is the most important piece of information the author wants you to know about that paragraph. A writer will state his/her main idea explicitly somewhere in the paragraph. That main idea may be stated at the beginning of the paragraph, in the middle, or at the end. The sentence in which the main idea is stated is the **topic sentence** of that paragraph.

Read the passage below:

For many years people have wished they could fly through the air like birds. Skydivers have found a way to fly without a machine. They jump from an airplane and fall at the rate of 120 miles an hour. The fall is so smooth that they don't feel like they're moving at all. When they pull the ripcord on their parachute they float the rest of the way to the ground.

Which sentence in the paragraph do you think summarizes the text best?

- a) Skydivers have found a way to fly without a machine.
- b) The fall is so smooth that they don't feel like they're moving at all.
- c) For many years people have wished they could fly through the air like birds.
- d) They jump from an airplane and fall at the rate of 120 miles an hour.

It is (a). The other sentences (b, c, and d) just elaborate what these ways of flying without a machine are. The topic sentence announces the general theme of the paragraph. Although the topic sentence may appear anywhere in the paragraph, it is usually in the beginning. The last sentence of a paragraph can also contain the topic sentence, it is likely to be a concluding sentence. It is used to sum up a discussion, to emphasize a point, or to restate all or part of the topic sentence so as to bring the paragraph to a close. It can fall in the middle of a paragraph as well, especially when a paragraph begins with an introductory sentence that is meant to grab your attention.

In order to find the topic sentence the best thing to do is ask yourself the question, "What is this about?" Keep asking yourself that question as you read a paragraph, until the answer to your question becomes clear.

Check Your Progress 3

Study these paragraphs and identify the topic sentence in each of them.

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Text 1: Today, boys try to prove they are men in many different ways. Long ago, it was not hard for some boys to know they had become men. American Indians had ceremonies and tests for boys to prove they were men. In one tribe, boys were given drugs which made them see visions of the gods. Having a vision was the first step towards being a man. In another tribe, boys had to prove that they could stand pain. They had to lie still on ground covered with ants and let the ants bite them again and again. When the Indian boys had been through these ceremonies and tests, they knew they were men.

The topic sentence of this paragraph is:

- a) Today, boys try to prove they are men in many different ways.
- b) In another tribe, boys had to prove that they could stand pain.
- c) They had to lie still on ground covered with ants and let the ants bite them again and again

- d) When the Indian boys had been through the ceremonies and tests, they knew they were men.

Text 2: The rules of conduct during an examination are clear. No books, calculators or papers are allowed in the test room. Proctors will not allow anyone with such items to take the test. Anyone caught cheating will be asked to leave the room. His or her test sheet will be taken. The incident will be reported to the proper authority. At the end of the test, all materials will be returned to the proctor. Failure to abide these by rules will result in a failing grade for this test.

The topic sentence of this paragraph is:

- a) The rules of conduct during an exam are clear.
- b) No books, calculators or papers are allowed in the test room.
- c) Anyone caught cheating will be asked to leave the room.
- d) Failure to abide these by rules will result in a failing grade for this test.

4.3.3 Identifying the Key Ideas

Any piece of writing is made up of a few key (or main) ideas. However, if all a writer did was to put these forward briefly and concisely, few – if any – readers would be able to fully grasp the writer's meanings, or be able to see the significance and implications of what he or she has to say. Consequently, writers tend to explain, extend, or 'flesh-out' what they think and say by including examples and evidence that lead the reader through the piece to make it more understandable.

As a reader, our job is to grasp these key ideas or items of information; to understand the essential points in a text. One useful technique to help you do this effectively is for you to highlight the key ideas. Underlining key ideas will help you focus your attention on what you are reading.

When you are selecting ideas from a passage, ask yourself the following question: If this idea were omitted, would the fundamental meaning of the passage be changed?

Newspaper headlines are the best precis that we see around us. News headlines generally present the main idea very succinctly and clearly. Read the news item below and say which of the headlines best summarizes it.

New York, May 31 (AP): A pink cocktail dress worn by Audrey Hepburn in "Breakfast at Tiffany's" was auctioned for \$192,000 (euro143,000) – more than six times its estimated value.

The sleeveless dress, worn for the scene in which Holly Golightly discovers her brother has died, sold Wednesday to a private European buyer at Christie's sale of film and entertainment memorabilia. The auction house said it had expected the dress to sell for up to \$30,000 (euro22,000).

"The sale was filled with iconic pieces", said Helen Hall, Christie's head of entertainment memorabilia. "It captured people's imagination".

Hall said the auction house was pleased with the results of the sale, which brought in \$1.2 million (euro890,000).

1. Audrey Hepburn's dress bought by a European buyer.

2. Dress worn by Audrey Hepburn auctioned for \$192,000

3. A Private European buyer pays \$192,000 for a dress

4. The dress Audrey Hepburn wore in "Breakfast at Tiffany's"

Which of these do you think is a suitable headline? To find this out, read the news item and, ask yourself 'What is the main idea?' It is definitely about a dress Audrey Hepburn wore in one of her films. It is also about the sale of her dress. It is about the huge price at which it was bought. The rest – who bought it and why – is important but not necessarily the main idea of the news item. Therefore, the answer is (2).

Check Your Progress 4

Read this passage and do the tasks that follow.

Computer games have been extremely popular for decades now and almost every household has at least one computer. However, it can be seen that playing these games causes social, educational and personal problems of several kinds both to youngsters and society. Firstly, youngsters who spend a great deal of time in front of a monitor are not playing sport. As a result, they are more likely to be overweight and less healthy, so more prone to diseases such as diabetes. In addition, the games themselves are often quite violent which add to many problems such as the lack of interaction and social skills with their friends and relatives. If we wish children to grow up to become well-adjusted members of society, these games should be more tightly controlled.

i. Identify the topic sentence.

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ii. Write down the main ideas.

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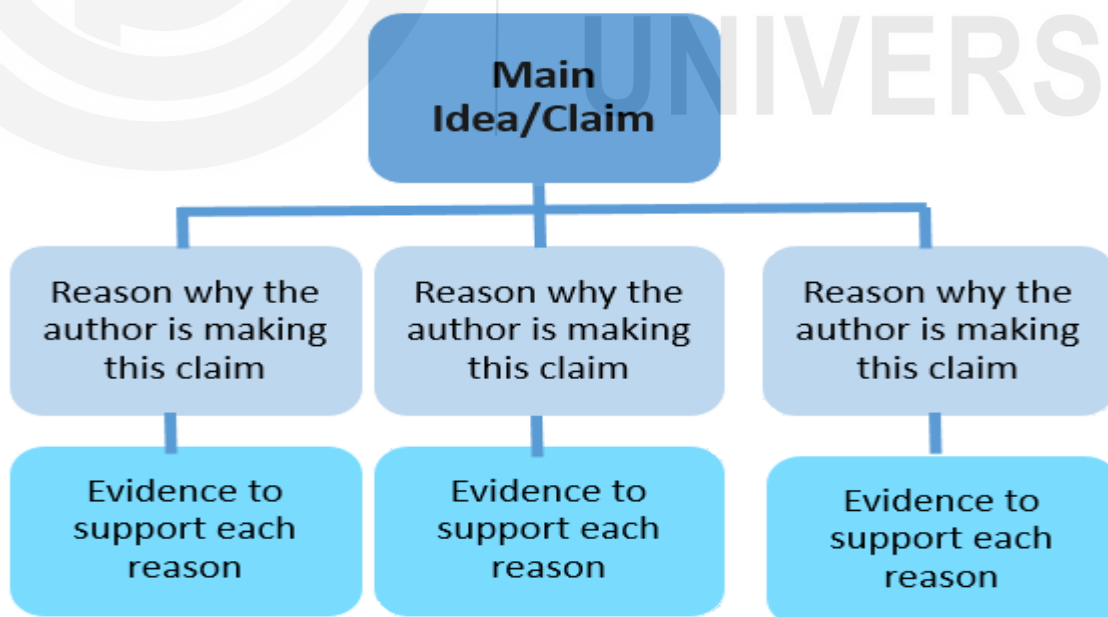
iii Write a summary which should not exceed 50 words.

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4.3.4 Identifying the Main Claim and Supporting Arguments

Every essay contains many ideas but the first thing you need to determine is what the central thesis of the text is. You need to be able to state this claim in a clear and concise manner.

You should skim through each text before reading it carefully and, after skimming, try to determine the central thesis or claim. Then you will be able to go on to the next step. The next thing you need to look for is the author's specific arguments in defence of his or her overall position (thesis). Usually an author gives more than one argument in favour of his/her thesis. A text can be seen as the following structure:



Let us look at one such text to explain this structure. Read the following text, it has **one main thesis and three supporting arguments** and **one conclusion**.

Text

The government should provide more financial assistance to parents who use childcare. Childcare centres may assist children in their early development. They give children an opportunity to mix with other children and to develop social skills at an early age. A whole range of learning occurs in childcare centres. Parents and children need to spend some time apart. Children become less dependent on their parents and parents themselves are less stressed and more effective care-givers when there are periods of separation. Recent studies indicate that the parent-child relationship can be improved by the use of high-quality childcare facilities. Parents who cannot go to work because they don't have access to childcare facilities cannot contribute to the national economy. They are not able to utilize their productive skills and do not pay tax. Government support for childcare services assists individual families and is important for the economic prosperity.

Make notes of the main idea and the three arguments in support:

The main idea

The arguments:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

The main idea asserts a conclusion – an idea, an opinion, a judgment, or a point of view – that the writer wants you to accept. The support includes reasons (shared beliefs, assumptions, and values) and evidence (facts, examples, statistics, and authorities) that give readers the basis for accepting the conclusion. It is also necessary to identify the type of author's arguments. We also need to identify how the author tries to persuade us: by appealing to our reason or intellect or to our emotions. Please note that even when we summarise, we need to acknowledge the source.

4.5 TECHNIQUES OF SUMMARISING

Read the passage given below. It talks about natural ways of fertilizing the soil. The method suggested here is the use of earthworms to freshen the soil. We will now help you summarise this rather large passage.

Earthworms Back in the Garden

- (1) Earthworms are the answer for every garden problem, according to Harold John Weigel. They can increase crop production, turn and freshen soil, and produce faster growth. Simply take care of the earthworms, and the earthworms will take care of the garden. Weigel is extremely enthusiastic about earthworms. They are tremendous creatures," the intestines of the Earth." Weigel says, quoting Charles Darwin.
- (2) Weigel is so excited about the benefits of worms that he is writing a book about them. He gardens using thousands of earthworms. He has persuaded his wife to put worms in her houseplant pots. He even suggests eating worms which he claims are 70 per cent protein. He has dreams of armies of earthworms helping to replace topsoil in the country. It is a

fact, he says that topsoil is disappearing every year through erosion. Wind and water carry away the soil, and nature needs centuries to replace it.

- (3) Within one year, one thousand earthworms and their descendants can change approximately one ton of organic matter into one of the highest-yield growing materials known, according to Weigel. Worms eat organic material and produce what is known as worm castings. If 1,000 pounds of earthworms are working one acre of land, every twenty-four hours they will produce 1,000 pounds of castings that function as a high-grade topsoil, Weigel said. They produce the same amount of topsoil in one day that nature could produce in 700 years through decomposition and erosive forces such as wind and rain.
- (4) Planting gardens in worm castings offers plants more than just all the necessary nutrients. For example, castings are very porous, and water flows easily through them. They are very absorbent being able to hold water easily. In addition, worms tend to be happiest around the roots of plants. Water can then flow directly to roots through the worm channels. The worms' channels also give air to the plants. Because the worms dig in the soil, they create a planting area of even consistency. Thus, the earthworms act as natural ploughs.
- (5) Worms offer all these benefits, yet they make few demands. They need only moisture, darkness, and food from the soil. Weigel gets his information on the benefits of earthworms from books and from the Worm Growers Association. That little-known group, which is active in many states, suggests that commercial farmers reintroduce earthworms in places where they have been killed through the use of synthetic fertilisers and other gardening chemicals.

(from Zukowsk-Faust, J., Johnston, S.S. and Atkinson, C.S. *Between the Lines*. Copyright 1983 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., reprinted by permission of the publisher)

Check your progress 6

- 1 Reread paragraph 1 and draw out the main idea from it. You can begin in this way:
'Earthworms are the answer for every garden problem'.

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(Check your answer with that given by us at the end of the unit)
You were expected to complete the above sentence by giving examples of the problems earthworms can solve, as listed in paragraph 1.

- 2 Now re-read paragraph 2 and draw out the main ideas from it. You will find that it contains two main ideas. Write them down here.

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Check your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

The paragraph is about the benefits of worms and the two benefits mentioned here should be selected for the summary. If you have chosen anything else, it can only be about Weigel's excitement and the usefulness of worms in general. In a summary we are not much concerned with the views of an individual such as Weigel, but with the facts themselves. The usefulness of worms in general has already been stated in the summary of paragraph 1, so that doesn't need to be repeated.

- 3 Now re-read paragraph 3 and note down the main points. Choose the most general statements. Specific examples should not be included unless they also express a general idea which has not already been stated. Write down your points here.

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Check your answers with those given at the end.

You will find that a large part of the first and the last sentence expresses the main points. All references to Weigel are left out. The point regarding worm castings, though important, is not really necessary for the main argument that runs through the whole piece.

- 4 Now read paragraph 4. Just select those points that have not already been stated. Choose adjectives and adjective-like phrases that are used to describe the effect of worms on the soil. You can begin your sentence this way:
'Worms make the soil

It is not necessary to give all the details even though they are interesting. In a summary you need basically to provide the main points that are important for the whole passage.

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Check your answer with that given by us.

- 5 Now read paragraph 5 and note down the main points. You will notice that this paragraph deals with the needs of worms. So, first state the three things that they need, starting with the words:
Worms need only

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Another point is also being made here regarding a Worm Growers' Association which is of interest in the context. This could also be mentioned. Put in a line about this.

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Check your answer with that given by us.

Now, if the whole summary we have produced is written up, it will read like this:

'Earthworms are the answer for every garden problem: they can increase crop production, turn and freshen soil and produce faster growth. Earthworms, it is claimed, are 70 per cent protein, so they can be eaten. They can replace the topsoil which is disappearing every year through erosion. Within one year, 1,000 earthworms and their descendants can change approximately 1 ton of organic matter into one of the highest-yield growing materials known. They produce the same amount of topsoil in one day that nature could produce in 700 years through decomposition and erosive forces. Worms make the soil porous, absorbent and of even consistency. Worms need only moisture, darkness and food from the soil. A Worm Growers' Association is active in many states.

Let us look at the summary carefully now to see if any changes are required in order to make it read like a connected passage. The first part all the way upto ... *and of even consistency*, is concerned with the function of earthworms. Each point that is being made up to this stage consists of a statement of yet another function of the earthworms, so no further connecting words are required.

However, the sentence 'Worms need only moisture, darkness and food from the soil' is concerned not with the function of worms but with the needs of these worms. It is therefore necessary to indicate that a different kind of idea is being brought in. A line from the original passage can be used in order to connect this sentence with the rest of the summary. Let us see how the summary will read with this addition:

'... Worms make the soil porous, absorbent and of even consistency. Worms offer all these benefits, yet they make few demands: they need only moisture, darkness and food from the soil.'

What about the last sentence of the summary? Does it fit in at that point in the summary? There is actually no connection between that and the sentence before it. It may perhaps be preferable to drop the mention of the Worm Growers' Association.

Notice that the summary does not necessarily follow the sequence of ideas of the original passage. It may follow the same sequence or it may not. What is important is that a clear line of argument develops.

Now rewrite the final version of the summary here.

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Check your answer with that given at the end of the Unit.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

The goal of writing a summary of an article, a chapter, or a book is to offer as accurately as possible the full sense of the original, but in a more condensed form. A summary restates the author's main point, purpose, intent, and supporting details in your own words. The process of summarizing enables you to better grasp the original and the result shows the reader that you understand it as well. In addition, the knowledge gained allows you to better analyse and critique the original.

In this unit we have shown you how we can write summaries of the passages we read by looking for the important ideas in each passage and the relationship between them; and adopting a proper arrangement for the main points in the summary and linking the various sentences in it with the use of connectives.

4.7 SUGGESTED READING

J. Zukowski/Faust, S.S. Johnston and C.S. Atkinson: *Between the Lines*.

4.8 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. i. imports ii. verified iii. versatile iv. prospective
v. aggravate vi. acquittal vii. arbitrate viii. infallible

Check Your Progress 2

1. I suggest we alter the length of the cloak.
2. Everything today requires peoples' conformity to some standard.
3. If we revise the programme, our efficiency in customer service will increase.
5. Many engineers have commented about not being notified when new information is filed in the library.

Check Your Progress 3

Topic sentences:

Text 1: (a) Today, boys try to prove they are men in many different ways.

Text 2: (d) Failure to abide by these rules will result in a failing grade for this test.

Check Your Progress 4

- i. The topic sentence: Playing computer games causes social, educational and personal problems to youngsters and society and therefore should be controlled.

- ii. The main ideas: youngsters stop playing sport – become overweight and less healthy – more prone to diseases – games may be violent – leads to lack of interaction and social skills.
- iii The summary

Nowadays almost every household has a computer. However, playing them causes social, educational and personal problems. Children can become overweight and more prone to diseases. Also, games are often violent and can lead to less interaction with friends and relatives. Therefore they need to be tightly controlled. (47 words)

Check your progress 5

Main Ideas in 'Earthworms Back in the Garden'

Paragraph 1: Earthworms are the answer for every garden problem: they can increase crop production, turn and freshen soil and produce faster growth.

Paragraph 2: Earthworms, it is claimed, are 70 per cent protein, so they can be eaten. They can replace topsoil which is disappearing every year through erosion.

Paragraph 3: Within one year, 1000 earthworms and their descendants can change approximately 1 ton of organic matter into one of the highest-yield growing materials known. They produce the same amount of topsoil in one day that nature could produce in 700 years through decomposition and erosive forces.

Paragraph 4: Worms make the soil porous, absorbent and of even consistency.

Paragraph 5: Worms need only moisture, darkness and food from the soil. A Worm Growers' Association is active in many states.

Final Summary of 'Earthworms Back in the Garden'

Earthworms are the answer for every garden problem: they can increase crop production, turn and freshen soil and produce faster growth. Earthworms, it is claimed, are 70 per cent protein, so they can be eaten. They can replace topsoil which is disappearing every year through erosion. Within one year, 1000 earthworms and their descendants can change approximately 1 ton of organic matter into one of the highest-yield growing materials known. They produce the same amount of topsoil in one day that nature could produce in 700 years through decomposition and erosive forces. Worms make the soil porous, absorbent and of even consistency. Worms offer all these benefits, yet they make few demands: they need only moisture, darkness and food from the soil.