UNIT 6. MORE COMPLEX SUMMARY QUESTIONS

A comprehensive test of reading and writing skills

OBJECTIVES

- To demonstrate understanding of explicit meanings
- To demonstrate understanding of implicit meanings and attitudes
- To select and use information for specific purposes
- To organise and structure ideas and opinions for deliberate effect
- To use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures appropriate to context
- To make accurate use of spelling, punctuation and grammar

INTRODUCTION

Summary writing is useful to make sure you have understood the passage you have just read, and to help explain what the passage is about to someone else. Summaries should be a piece of continuous writing and no more than 250 words in length.

WHAT IS A SUMMARY?

To summarize means to condense a text without losing the important information, so writing a summary involves taking the essential meaning from what you read, but making it shorter.

KEY TERM: LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION

- The way the language used by writers conveys their thoughts and ideas to a reader.

EXERCISE 1.

Read carefully the article 'Genetically Modified Foods- for and against' and then summarise:

- What GM foods are and how they were developed.
- The reasons given as to why they could be advantageous
- The concerns that some people in the UK have about GM foods.

Remember to make a list of key points and to use your own words as far as possible. You should write between 200 and 250 words.

Genetically Modified Foods

There has been much concern recently about GM foods, some of which are being tested and some of which are already used as ingredients in the food we eat. GM stands for 'genetically-modified', and describes the process by which scientists are able to pinpoint the individual gene which produces a desired outcome, extract it, copy it and insert it into another organism.

To some extent, humans have been involved in genetic modification for centuries. For example, larger cattle which gave more milk were bred to produce even larger offspring. Seeds from cereals and other crops that were hardier and grew better were selected for planting the following year to produce better yields. With genetically modified organisms however, the modifications involved are often of a kind that could not possibly occur naturally. For example, adding cow growth hormone to the embryo of a broiler chicken to produce a larger, faster growing chicken, or adding genes from a virus to a plant to allow it to become resistant to the virus.

There are many reasons why GM foods could be advantageous. For example, a crop could be made to grow quicker, with increased protein and vitamin levels, or with less fat. An often-used argument in favour of GM crops is that drought-resistant crops could help to alleviate famine in developing countries, where low rainfall often leads to food shortages. Techniques have also been developed to make fresh produce last longer, so that it can ripen on the plant and be transported more easily with less wastage.

The first GM food products – a tomato purée and a vegetarian cheese – appeared in British supermarkets in 1996. The purée was made from tomatoes which were designed to stay firmer for longer, leading to less waste in harvesting. The tomatoes also held less water, meaning that less water was required to grow them and less energy was used removing water from them to turn them into purée. This in turn made the purée cheaper for the consumer.

The first GM soya was planted in the US in the same year, and up to 60% of all products on supermarket shelves could now contain some GM soya. Monsanto, a major GM manufacturer, has developed a strain of GM soya which is resistant to Roundup, its own brand of herbicide. This allows weeds to be controlled even after the soya has started to grow, saving an estimated 33% on the amount of herbicide used. Roundup Ready® soya amounted to 15% of the 1997 US soya crop.

GM foods have been largely accepted by the Americans, with nearly 70% of them saying that they would buy GM foods even if they were simply engineered to stay fresh for longer. Even more would purchase foods modified to resist insect pests, resulting in less use of pesticides.

In the UK, people are being far more cautious, possibly with good reason. Lessons learned during the BSE crisis are still very much in people's minds. Can we trust what we are eating, and what could be the long-term effects?

The UK has potentially more to lose by the introduction of GM crops. In America, farming takes place on an industrial scale, with millions of acres used exclusively for growing crops. Intensive use of pesticides has virtually wiped out wild animals and plants in the huge crop fields of the US. The Americans can afford to do this, as they also have many huge wilderness conservation areas often the size of several English counties, which are havens for all their native wildlife. In the UK however, farms are an integral part of the countryside. The use of herbicide – or insect-resistant crops – could potentially have severe effects on biodiversity, by virtually wiping out wild flowers and consequently the insects that feed on them, and further up the food chain, the predators that eat the insects.

Some crops are being developed to improve soil quality, by removing heavy metals from the soil, for example, so that they can be harvested and destroyed. An excellent idea, but what about the animals that eat the contaminated plants? Others are being developed for salt resistance, so that they can be grown in previously unusable areas. But what if their seeds were to be carried to a saltmarsh? Would they be a threat to wild species that have lived there naturally for years?

So far, there is no evidence of GM food being harmful to humans, but the rules governing their testing are less strict than with medicines, and after BSE, we know that 'no scientific evidence of harm' is not the same as 'safe to eat'.

Adapted from *Young People's Trust for the Environment*

EXAMPLE RESPONSE

The purpose of this section is to help guide you through the process of writing a summary of this passage.

- First, we will look at the thought processes of a student approaching the task and relate these to the highlighted section.
- Next, we will make numbered notes of the main points to be included.
- Finally, we will produce an example of a final summarised version of the points required by the question.

Thought processes

Sections of the passage highlighted in yellow are commented on below.

1 The title of the passage is a useful way of finding an overview; however, does it match the requirements of the question? In this case it does for two-thirds of the topic of the summary so it's useful to keep the point in mind to help give a clear focus when writing the final version.

2 This sentence is clearly indicated as an 'example'; it adds a further point of information about a particular process, but when writing a summary we're looking to find overall points and not get bogged down in illustrations, so it can be ignored.

3 The topic sentence is useful here – it clearly points towards the advantages of GM foods.

4 Another example, but this can be turned round so that the general point it's making can be included in the summary.

5 Most of this paragraph is simply giving illustrations of different methods of creating GM foods, but the point about saving energy can be included.

6 Again, this paragraph contains some interesting supporting details which aren't directly relevant, but there is another definite advantage mentioned in the reference to saving on water in the previous paragraph.

7 This paragraph is about the popularity of GM foods and who buys them – it's not directly relevant to the question.

8 This is where the section about 'concerns' starts.

9 This account of the differences between the USA and UK needs to be looked at carefully – the comparison itself may not be relevant to the summary but some relevant points are being made through it which need to be refocused.

10 The writer is making criticisms of GM farming through the questions he is asking in this and the following paragraph – the concerns are relevant to the summary but they must be expressed as statements and not questions.

11 The concluding paragraph includes neither concerns nor advantages – it sums up the article itself effectively but there's no need for a general summing up in a summary where words are limited.

Notes

Sections of the passage highlighted in pink contain key points for the summary.

1 GM stands for 'genetically-modified'.

2 Scientists extract and copy genes which have a particular effect from one plant and insert them into another organism.

3 The modifications involved are unlikely to occur naturally.

4 Another approach is to add genes from a virus to a plant so the plant becomes resistant to the virus.

5 A crop can be made to grow quicker, with increased protein and vitamin levels, or with less fat.
6 Crops can be made drought-resistant and reduce famine in developing countries, with low rainfall and subsequent food shortages.
7 GM processes can make fresh produce last longer; it can ripen on the plant and be transported more efficiently.
8 There is less waste in harvesting and less water is required to grow crops.
9 GM processes can also lead to savings on the amount of herbicide used.
10 Plants can be modified to resist insect pests, therefore less use of pesticides.
11 Concerns about the long-term effects.
12 In the UK the use of herbicide – or insect-resistant crops – could potentially have severe effects on biodiversity, by virtually wiping out wild flowers and consequently the insects that feed on them, and further up the food chain, the predators that eat the insects.
13 We don't know if GM plants might adversely affect indigenous plants if, for example, seeds from plants carried into salt marshes that are modified to be salt-resistant could be a threat to wild species that have lived there naturally for years.

Final summary

Genetically-modified crops are those where scientists have transplanted a gene which has a particular function in one organism into another organism; such a modification is unlikely to occur naturally.

One advantage of this process is to make a strain of plants resistant to a virus by adding genes from a virus to a plant. By increasing and modifying their protein and vitamin levels, crops can be made to grow more quickly; other crops can be made drought-resistant which can help to reduce famine in developing countries where food is in short supply because of low rainfall.

Other advantages of genetic modification include making fresh produce last longer and be exported more efficiently by allowing it to ripen on the plant, creating less waste in harvesting and using less water to grow plants. Through modification plants can be made more resistant to insect pests, resulting in less use of pesticides.

There are, however, concerns about the unknown long-term effects in the UK. Insect-resistant crops (along with the use of herbicides) could have serious effects on biodiversity as destroying wild flowers could affect nature's food chain.

Similarly, we do not know whether GM plants might adversely affect indigenous crops; for example, seeds from plants carried into salt marshes that are modified to be salt-resistant, could be a threat to wild species that have lived there naturally for years. (228 words)

LET'S WRITE IT!

- Read the question
- Read the text
- Find the information
- Write notes
- Write your answer

GOOD LUCK!