

BACK TALK: A SUMMARIZING ACTIVITY

Purpose: For the four integrated speaking tasks on the TOEFL® iBT test, students need to read and listen for main points and then summarize them in their own words. A quick, fun way to practice this is to use tellbacks, an oral summarizing activity that gives them instant feedback on their comprehension. Here, three variations are presented as reading exercises. They can also be used with listening passages.

Organization: Pairs

Preparation: Short reading and/or listening passages either from test prep materials or, for more fun, from other sources

Time: 10-20 minutes

Procedure:

Variation 1 - Tell Your Partner

1. Divide the class into pairs. Students on the left in each pair are A's and students on the right are B's.
2. Give each student a copy of a reading selection. In addition to TOEFL® materials, interesting short articles (at least 5 or 6 paragraphs) from newspapers or magazines work well.
3. Tell students that they're going to do a 2-minute timed reading and that they should read as much as they can as quickly as they can. Remind students of these efficient reading tips.

Efficient Reading Tips:

- Keep going! Don't stop for unknown vocabulary.
- Keep going! Don't reread.
- Let your eyes do the reading! Don't use your finger. Don't use your lips to sound out words. (No fingers! No lips!)
- Read groups of words, not single words.

4. Time the students as they read for 2 minutes. Then have them stop and turn their papers face down on the desk.
5. Instruct all the student A's to tell their partner anything they remember about what they've read. It can be anything, general or specific, and any amount is fine. Instruct each student B just to

- listen. (They should not correct or interrupt student A). When student A is finished, student B can add to the tellback. This part should take about 1 minute.
6. Do a brief whole-class tellback, asking students to share what they remembered or understood.
 7. Repeat steps 3-6, having each student pick up wherever they left off in the reading. This time students switch roles. (Or if you really want to keep them on their toes, appoint all the A's as speakers again!)
 8. Repeat this activity a total of four or five times. You can adjust the timing for the readings to 1 or 1½ minutes if it seems appropriate.
 9. Take a moment so that students can reflect on the activity. They should ask themselves how this went for them. If they were not very successful, have them try to assess what got in their way. For example: *Was the vocabulary too hard? Were they reading too slowly? Could they understand, but couldn't put their thoughts into words?*, etc.

Variation 2 - Take Notes and Tell

Follow the procedure for Variation 1, but have students take notes while they're reading and use these notes during their tellback time. (Add an extra minute to the reading time.)

Variation 3 - Tell 3 People and Write It Down

1. Pass out newspapers, magazines, or books. (Adult students really love books with lots of pictures but sophisticated vocabulary such as the *Eyewitness* series from DK Publishing, juvenile encyclopedias, and various history and scientific books for middle school and up, found in many libraries. We suggest you explore this option if it's available to you.)
2. Have students take a moment to choose an article or passage that appeals to them.
3. Give students ten minutes to read as much as they can. (See *Efficient Reading Tips* in Variation 1.) Students may **not** use dictionaries!
4. Have students put their reading materials aside, stand up, and choose a partner.
5. Give students two minutes each to tell each other what they read about.

6. Have students change partners, and this time give them $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes each to tell each other what they read about.
7. Repeat once again with a new partner, taking only 45 seconds each to tell each other what they read about.
8. Have students sit down. Give each student an index card. Give them 3 minutes to briefly write a summary of what they read about. (Handing students an index card or small piece of paper seems to make this a manageable-sized job.)

Possible Follow-up:

1. Read some of the summaries out loud and critique them. Some questions to discuss are:
 - Is the main idea stated? What is it?
 - How many of these questions were answered: Who? Where? What? When? Why? How?
 - Were any examples given to support the main idea?
2. Have students revisit their original reading and decide whether they expressed the ideas accurately and completely. Have students mark the important points with a check if they covered them and X if they missed them.