

HUNTER COLLEGE READING/WRITING CENTER
THE WRITING PROCESS

Invention: Guidelines for Writing a Summary

When you underline and annotate a text, when you ask yourself questions about its contents, when you work out an outline of its structure, you are establishing your understanding of what you are reading. When you write a summary, you are demonstrating your understanding of the text and communicating it to your reader.

To summarize is to condense a text to its main points and to do so in your own words. To include every detail is neither necessary nor desirable. Instead, you should extract only those elements which you think are most important--the main idea (or thesis) and its essential supporting points, which in the original passage may have been interwoven with less important material.

Many students make the mistake of confusing summary with analysis. They are not the same thing. An analysis is a discussion of ideas, techniques, and/or meaning in a text. A summary, on the other hand, does not require you to critique or respond to the ideas in a text. When you analyze a piece of writing, you generally summarize the contents briefly in order to establish for the reader the ideas that your essay will then go on to analyze, but a summary is not a substitute for the analysis itself. If you are writing a literature paper, for example, your teacher probably does not want you to simply write a plot summary of a text. You may include some very brief summary within a literature paper, but only as much as necessary to make your own interpretation, your thesis, clear.

It is important to remember that a summary is not an outline or synopsis of the points that the author makes in the order that the author gives them. Instead, a summary is a distillation of the ideas or argument of the text. It is a reconstruction of the major point or points of development of a text, beginning with the thesis or main idea, followed by the points or details that support or elaborate on that idea.

If a text is organized in a linear fashion you may be able to write a summary simply by outlining the major points from the beginning of the text to the end. However, you should not assume that this will always be the case. Not all writers use such a straightforward structure. They may not state the thesis or main idea immediately at the beginning, but rather build up to it slowly, and they may introduce a point of development in one place and then return to it later in the text.

However, for the sake of clarity, a summary should present the author's points in a straightforward structure. In order to write a good summary, you may have to gather minor points or components of an argument from different places in the text in order to summarize the text in an organized way. A point made in the beginning of an essay and then one made toward the end may need to be grouped together in your summary to concisely convey the argument that the author is making. In the end, you will have read, digested, and reconstructed the text in a shorter, more concise form.

WHEN AND HOW TO SUMMARIZE

There are many instances in which you will have to write a summary. You may be assigned to write a one or two page summary of an article or reading, or you may be asked to include a brief summary of a text as part of a response paper or critique. Also, you may write summaries of articles as part of the note-taking and planning process for a research paper, and you may want to include these summaries, or at least parts of them, in your paper. The writer of a research paper is especially dependent upon summary as a means of referring to source materials. Through the use of summary in a research paper, you can condense a broad range of information, and you can present and explain the relevance of a number of sources all dealing with the same subject.

You may also summarize your own paper in an introduction in order to present a brief overview of the ideas you will discuss throughout the rest of the paper.

Depending on the length and complexity of the original text as well as your purpose in using summary, a summary can be relatively brief – a short paragraph or even a single sentence – or quite lengthy – several paragraphs or even an entire paper.

QUALITIES OF A SUMMARY

A good summary should be comprehensive, concise, coherent, and independent. These qualities are explained below:

1. A summary must be comprehensive. You should isolate all the important points in the original passage and note them down in a list. Review all the ideas on your list, and include in your summary all the ones that are indispensable to the author's development of his/her thesis or main idea.
2. A summary must be concise. Eliminate repetitions in your list, even if the author restates the same points. Your summary should be considerably shorter than the source. You are hoping to create an overview; therefore, you need not include every repetition of a point or every supporting detail.
3. A summary must be coherent. It should make sense as a piece of writing in its own right; it should not merely be taken directly from your list of notes or sound like a disjointed collection of points.
4. A summary must be independent. You are not being asked to imitate the author of the text you are writing about. On the contrary, you are expected to maintain your own voice throughout the summary. Don't simply quote the author; instead use your own words to express your understanding of what you have read. After all, your summary is based on your interpretation of the writer's points or ideas. However, you should be careful not to create any misrepresentation or distortion by introducing comments or criticisms of your own.

TWO TECHNIQUES FOR WRITING SUMMARIES

Summarizing Shorter Texts (ten pages or fewer)

1. Write a one-sentence summary of each paragraph.
2. Formulate a single sentence that summarizes the whole text.
3. Write a paragraph (or more): begin with the overall summary sentence and follow it with the paragraph summary sentences.
4. Rearrange and rewrite the paragraph to make it clear and concise, to eliminate repetition and relatively minor points, and to provide transitions. The final version should be a complete, unified, and coherent whole

Summarizing Longer Texts (eleven pages or more)

1. Outline the text. Break it down into its major sections--groups of paragraphs focused on a common topic--and list the main supporting points for each section.
2. Write a one or two sentence summary of each section.
3. Formulate a single sentence to summarize the whole text, looking at the author's thesis or topic sentences as a guide.
4. Write a paragraph (or more): begin with the overall summary sentence and follow it with the section summary sentences.

5. Rewrite and rearrange your paragraph(s) as needed to make your writing clear and concise, to eliminate relatively minor or repetitious points, and to provide transitions. Make sure your summary includes all the major supporting points of each idea. The final version should be a unified, complete, and coherent whole.