

Summary

A summary is a concise restatement in one's own words of another, longer document, usually an article or a report. Summaries are often used in business and academic settings in which a committee or small group of teachers or students need to grasp a great deal of material very quickly. In such cases, the group will summarize for the group as a whole, so every person won't have to read every single document. Needless to say, in such cases the summaries must be accurate as well as brief.

Summaries are also handy study tools for students, particularly those facing essay tests. Summarizing the chapters in a textbook or articles assigned to be read can help in reviewing the material and is a great help in remembering the material. Moreover, once you have written down the information, writing it again under the pressure of time, as during an essay test, becomes much easier.

The summaries we will write for this class should be as carefully composed as an essay; since summary is such an essential writing skill, I want you to take it seriously and demonstrate that you can do it well. The length of a summary will vary widely depending on how you are using them. A detailed summary may be several pages long. A quick summary that you use to introduce a source could be only a sentence or two.

A good working summary is written **in your own words**, though you may want to borrow brief key quotations from the original. It **must** have the following characteristics:

- Above all, it must maintain and communicate the meaning of the original.
- It should introduce the original text formally with the author's full-name, the full title, and a brief summary of the main point or general topic of the text.
- All ideas should be attributed to the original author either through signal phrases or in-text citations.
- It must not contain your opinions or views on the original.
- It must stick strictly to what the original writer had to say.
- It must contain some of the main points of the original.
- Usually it will not contain the supporting points (the details and specifics), unless one or more of them is of unusual importance.
- It must be no longer than 1 page.
- It must be formatted according to MLA style.

You can see that to write a good summary you need to exercise a great deal of judgment about what is important to include and what represents too much detail. A good summary should answer these questions:

1. What is the subject of the original? What problem or situation is the writer addressing?
2. What are the main points of the original? The summary may or may not stick to the same ordering of these points as the original.
3. What conclusions does the original reach?

STEPS IN WRITING A SUMMARY

How do you go about writing a good working summary? If you follow the steps below, you will have an excellent chance of producing a useful and accurate summary.

1. Read and annotate the text to get an understanding of the whole piece. When you are done, review your notes and annotations and write in your own words the *point* of the piece, which you will usually find in the introduction and/or the conclusion.
2. Reread and mark the important ideas. Carefully check the beginnings of paragraphs for topic sentences that announce new points. Normally, you will not want to highlight supporting facts, but some may be so striking or otherwise important that you will want to include them in your summary.
3. Now write the introductory statement of your summary, explaining what the original is about. Try to confine yourself to one sentence—two at the most. Here think about what the author is generally *doing* in the piece--arguing, describing, explaining, defining, comparing, and so forth. You want the introductory statement to give your reader a general sense of what the text was about.
4. Decide on the order in which you want to present the main points of the original; you will probably need to do some scribbling on scratch paper to do this. Review your annotations and notes to make sure you cover everything.
5. Write the body of your summary, using your own words and making sure to cover all the key points.
6. Write your last part, on which you explain what the original author's conclusions were.
7. Test the strength and accuracy of your summary by asking yourself whether someone who has never read the original text would have an accurate understanding of what it is about if they had only read your summary. Remember that this is the goal and purpose of summary.
8. Proofread for spelling, typographical errors, and grammar. In particular, compare the spelling of titles, author's names, and other names and key terms with those in the original text.