

Summary Writing

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 that 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.

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. 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 paraphrasing 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.

Process and Hints to Summary Writing

One major challenge with summary writing is deciding what to include and what to leave out. A bit of instruction on the process to follow, along with useful techniques, will have you writing expert summaries in no time.

1. Read the text for understanding, without editing. Make sure you understand the content, including major and minor sections, as well as the overlying message being conveyed. Look closely at topic sentences and key words repeated throughout.
2. Read through the material and cross out non-vital information. Underline what you believe to be the most important points, even if those points are words or phrases.
3. Write your summary in your own words. Follow both the organization of the original as well as its tone, though you need to make sure your own point of view is purely objective (reporting content of the text, only). Opinions should not appear in a summary. Any words or phrases from the original need to be properly documented and punctuated.
4. Your summary should be 15 to 20% the length of the original.
5. Be sure to go back when you've finished your summary and compare it to the original for accuracy.

Don'ts

- Don't include what is *not* in the text. A summary should cover the subject and nothing beyond the subject.
- Do not repeat ideas. Repetitions are used for emphasis. Some words, phrases, clauses, sentences, ideas or points may be deliberately repeated to emphasize the answer. In that case write "the writer emphasizes..." instead of repeating the words.
- Don't comment on, analyze, or offer opinion.
- Don't compare to another subject beyond the information provided in the text.

- Don't write in first or second person.
- Don't ask questions.
- Don't use bullets or any form of outline. A summary is not simply a list of ideas.
- Don't refer to the summary itself. For example, "This summary is about..."
- Don't copy exact sentences. Your answers should be original; that is, you should select the main ideas and relevant details from the passage, express them in new sentences and also translate them in your own words into general statements.
- Do not write unnecessary details such as illustrations, repetitions and examples with your main ideas.
- Do not use flowery and ambiguous sentences. The flowery language means a figure of speech that may be used as the main ideas in the passage and ambiguity is a word or a sentence that has more than one meaning and interpretation.
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Dos

- Maintain consistency that is clear, concise, yet impersonal.
- Make sure you have accurately included the main idea.
- Write in third person.
- Include passive voice, if needed to emphasize objectivity.
- Mimic the organizational pattern of the work.
- Write in your own words, but when the original author's words are the most concise presentation of the main ideas or details you should quote and properly cite.
- Use [sentence variety](#). An effective summary is never boring.
- Start with "The writer says that..." if the original text is in first person.
- Mention the text and writer in the very first sentence of your summary. Include an opening line listing the author's name, title of the work, and a broad overview of the work, such as the genre or overall idea of the work.
- Use one-word substitutions to make your sentences more precise and reduce complexity.
- **Close your summary by restating an overview of the work in one sentence.**

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