

Summary Writing

The purpose of this handout is to explore summary writing, an important genre of writing that is often used in business, scientific inquiry, and education. By learning how to summarize more effectively, you will get more out of the things you read and be able to share what you've learned more successfully with others.

A summary restates another's work **in your own words**. As you summarize, you state the main idea and supporting points of your source in the order of the original. The poet X.J. Kennedy defines summary in this way: "You take the essence of the author's meaning, without the supporting evidence and other details that make that gist convincing or interesting" (18).

Why Summarize?

- Summarizing is one of the best strategies to become a better, more critical reader.
- Summarizing illustrates your clear understanding of the source work.
- Summarizing is a useful step in exam preparation: by summarizing you create your own condensed/shortened version of the source, a version which you can refer to later as you study the material.
- Summarizing will focus your attention on how the source work is organized, a focus which will strengthen your own organization as a writer.
- Summarizing a source in your own words allows you to make clear distinctions between the ideas of others and your own ideas.
- Summarizing allows you to join the academic conversation by incorporating the ideas of others (source work) into your own work.

As you can see, summarizing has many benefits that not only help you better understand others' ideas, but also help you become a better, more active reader. Because of this, there are many situations when you may find summary writing helpful.

What Can Be Summarized?

- Lectures, presentations
- Textbooks, course print, or online materials
- Video clips / audio clips
- Workshops
- Essays, journal articles, etc.

Based on the situation, you may find different ways to best compose your summary and, when asked to summarize for a class assignment, you should always follow your instructor's guidelines. Most summaries, however, follow a general format that, once learned, can help you summarize more effectively and in less time. Below, you'll find a step-by-step guide on how to write a basic summary to help get you started.

HOW TO WRITE A SUMMARY

Step 1

Critical Reading

1. Read the attached essay by Sherman Alexie closely. Understand the writer's meaning. Look up words or concepts that you don't know.
2. Re-read and annotate the essay.
3. Understand the organization. Work through the essay to identify its sections (single paragraphs or groups of paragraphs focused on a single topic).
4. Identify the main idea for each paragraph (or section) and note that main idea in the margin.
5. On a separate sheet of paper, write a one sentence summary *in your own words* for each paragraph. In this way, you'll actually be outlining the essay.
6. Re-read your one-sentence summary outline of the essay. Now that you understand the paragraph points clearly, you'll be able to synthesize these points into a main point for the entire essay.
7. At the top of your outline, write this main idea of the entire essay *in your own words*.

Once you've finished with the outline, you're ready to begin drafting the body of your summary. At this stage, you needn't worry about grammar or punctuation. You're simply trying to get your ideas on paper so you can begin organizing and developing them.

Step 2

Drafting

1. Begin with a **Topic Sentence** that states the author, the title, and the main idea of the essay. For example: *In his essay "Superman and Me," Sherman Alexie illustrates the power of reading and writing for Native Americans.*
2. Working from your outline, write out the paragraph's main/supporting points in your own words in the same order as the points appear in the essay.
3. Remember that a summary paragraph requires more than stringing together the entries in an outline. Use **transitions** to fill in the logical connections between the author's ideas.
4. Repeat the author's name from time to time for transition, reminding your reader that the ideas are the author's and not your own. Refer to the author by name. For example: *Alexie acknowledges, or Alexie explains.*
5. Refer to the author by last name, not first. For example, if the author's name is Sherman Alexie, and you'd like to shorten the reference to one name, write Alexie, not Sherman.
6. If you use **quotations** in your summary, use them sparingly. In a summary paragraph of 10 – 12 sentences, use no more than two quotations.
7. Integrate your quotations effectively. If you use full-sentence quotations, provide a lead-in and an end-sentence citation.
8. Write a **conclusion** sentence that summarizes *in your own words* the conclusion of the source.

When you have your rough draft finished, you're ready to begin shaping and refining it. Again, don't spend time worrying about punctuation or grammar at this stage as you are likely to modify or remove large parts of your summary as you revise.

Step 3

Revising

1. Compare your summary version to the original essay. Have you remained faithful to the essay? If the author of the essay read your summary, would he or she feel well represented?
2. Remember your **audience**: he or she has not read the source essay. Have you made your summary clear and understandable to someone who has not read the original essay?
3. Have you been careful not to plagiarize? If you used the words of the author, have you put those words in quotation marks?
4. Have you refrained from including your own ideas, opinions, or interpretations?

When you are satisfied with the shape and substance of your paragraph, you're ready to start putting the finishing touches on it. It's often helpful at this stage to read your summary aloud or invite others to read it as this can help you identify errors.

Step 4

Editing

1. Be vigilant regarding your frequent grammatical errors.
2. Look out for the most common grammatical errors: fragments, comma-splices, fused-sentences, comma errors, subject-verb agreement errors, pronoun errors, apostrophe errors, spelling errors.
3. Check your format. If you've been asked to write a summary *paragraph*, have you formatted your summary in paragraph form? If you've been given a particular length (e.g. 10 – 12 sentences) have you stayed within these guidelines?

Congratulations! Now that you've finished your summary, you're ready to share it with a friend, family member, or teacher.

