#### 0 Z m

### "THEY SAY"

Starting with What Others Are Saying

tioner, he referred to several critics who had vigorously audience that we got a clue: in response to one questhe speaker finished and took questions from the going on and on about X. It was only after of these questions, we could only wonder why he was tionary? Since the speaker gave no hint of an answer to any against X's work or challenged its value? Was the speaker's interpretation of what X had done somehow novel or revoluit? Were there commentators in the field who had argued speaker need to make it in the first place? Did anyone dispute work was very important-was clear enough, but why did the found ourselves somewhat puzzled: the argument—that Dr. X's long passages from them. The speaker was obviously both detail to various books and articles by Dr. X and by quoting to illustrate his thesis by referring extensively and in great certain sociologist—call him Dr. X—had done very good work ence where the speaker's central claim seemed to be that a learned and impassioned, but as we listened to his talk we in a number of areas of the discipline. The speaker proceeded Not long ago we attended a talk at an academic conferaudience in Figure 1 on

This story illustrates an important lesson: that to give writing the most important thing of all—namely, a point—a writer needs to indicate clearly not only what his or her thesis is, but also what larger conversation that thesis is responding to. Because our speaker failed to mention what others had said about Dr. X's work, he left his audience unsure about why he felt the need to say what he was saying. Perhaps the point was clear to other sociologists in the audience who were more familiar with the debates over Dr. X's work than we were. But even they, we bet, would have understood the speaker's point better if he'd sketched in some of the larger conversation his own claims were a part of and reminded the audience about what "they say."

This story also illustrates an important lesson about the *order* in which things are said: to keep an audience engaged, a writer needs to explain what he or she is responding to—either before offering that response or, at least, very early in the discussion. Delaying this explanation for more than one or two paragraphs in a very short essay, three or four pages in a longer one, or more than ten or so pages in a book-length text reverses the natural order in which readers process material—and in which writers think and develop ideas. After all, it seems very unlikely that our conference speaker first developed his defense of Dr. X and only later came across Dr. X's critics. As someone knowledgeable in his field, the speaker surely encountered the criticisms first and only then was compelled to respond and, as he saw it, set the record straight.

Therefore, when it comes to constructing an argument (whether orally or in writing), we offer you the following advice: remember that you are entering a conversation and therefore need to start with "what others are saying," as the

title of this chapter recommends, and then introduce your own ideas as a response. Specifically, we suggest that you summarize what "they say" as soon as you can in your text, and remind readers of it at strategic points as your text unfolds. Though it's true that not all texts follow this practice, we think it's important for all writers to master it before they depart from it.

This is not to say that you must start with a detailed list of everyone who has written on your subject before you offer your own ideas. Had our conference speaker gone to the opposite extreme and spent most of his talk summarizing Dr. X's critics with no hint of what he himself had to say, the audience probably would have had the same frustrated "why-is-he-going-on-like-this?" reaction. What we suggest, then, is that as soon as possible you state your own position and the one it's responding to together, and that you think of the two as a unit. It is generally best to summarize the ideas you're responding to briefly, at the start of your text, and to delay detailed elaboration until later. The point is to give your readers a quick preview of what is motivating your argument, not to drown them in details right away.

Starting with a summary of others' views may seem to contradict the common advice that writers should lead with their own thesis or claim. Although we agree that you shouldn't keep readers in suspense too long about your central argument, we also believe that you need to present that argument as part of some larger conversation, indicating something about the arguments of others that you are supporting, opposing, amending, complicating, or qualifying. One added benefit of summarizing others' views as soon as you can: you let those others do some of the work of framing and clarifying the issue you're writing about.

Consider, for example, how George Orwell starts his famous essay "Politics and the English Language" with what others are saying.

must inevitably share in the general collapse. . . . ilization is decadent and our language-so the argument runsthat we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civthe English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that

habits . . . which can be avoided if one is willing to take the nec-[But] the process is reversible. Modern English . . . is full of bad

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

not do anything about the bad state of the English language. Orwell is basically saying, "Most people assume that we can-But I say we can.

as we do in this chapter—a relevant anecdote. If you choose with an illustrative quotation, a revealing fact or statistic, or-Instead of opening with someone else's views, you could start directly, with a minimum of steps. trates the view you're addressing or leads you to that view one of these formats, however, be sure that it in some way illus-Of course, there are many other powerful ways to begin.

graph to an anecdote about the conference speaker and then move quickly at the start of the second paragraph to the misconception lovers think too highly of themselves. ing, from a 2004 opinion piece in the New York Times Book about writing exemplified by the speaker. In the following open-Review, Christina Nehring also moves quickly from an anecdote illustrating something she dislikes to her own claim—that book In opening this chapter, for example, we devote the first para-

"I'm a reader!" announced the yellow button. "How about you?" I val of Books. "I'll bet you're a reader," he volunteered, as though we looked at its bearer, a strapping young guy stalking my town's Festi-

# Starting with What Others Are Saying

I mumbled something apologetic and melted into the crowd. wanted to yell, and fling my Barnes & Noble bag at his feet. Inste-d, were two geniuses well mer. "No," I replied. "Absolutely not," I

There's a new piety in the air: the self congratulation of book

CHRISTINA NEHRING, "Books Make You a Boring Person"

keep telling themselves how great they are Nehring's anecdote is really a kind of "they say": book lovers

#### TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING WHAT "THEY SAY"

have recommended to our conference speaker. are saying. Here are some standard templates that we would There are lots of conventional ways to introduce what others

- A number of sociologists have recently suggested that X's work has several fundamental problems.
- ▶ It has become common today to dismiss .........
- In their recent work, Y and Z have offered harsh critiques of

#### TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING "STANDARD VIEWS"

ventional way of thinking about a topic. "standard view" move, in which you introduce a view that has become so widely accepted that by now it is essentially the con-The following templates can help you make what we call the

### ONE "THEY SAY"

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over circumstances	Americans have always believed that individual
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	belie
	eved
	that
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	la c
	individual effort can triumph
	can
	] 
	imp
	<del>&gt;</del>

► Conventional wisdom has it that

Common sense seems to dictate that

The standard way of thinking about topic X has it that \_\_\_\_\_

► It is often said that

► My whole life I have heard it said that

You would think that

► Many people assume that

These templates are popular because they provide a quick and efficient way to perform one of the most common moves that writers make: challenging widely accepted beliefs, placing them on the examining table and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses.

# TEMPLATES FOR MAKING WHAT "THEY SAY" SOMETHING YOU SAY

Another way to introduce the views you're responding to is to present them as your own. That is, the "they say" that you respond to need not be a view held by others; it can be one that you yourself once held or one that you are ambivalent about.

I've always believed that museums are boring.

► When I was a child, I used to think that

2 4

# Starting with What Others Are Saying

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Although I should know better by now, I cannot help thinking that
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know
better l
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now,
_
cannot
help
thinking
that

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the
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time
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The destriction of the second
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believe

# TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING SOMETHING IMPLIED OR ASSUMED

Another sophisticated move a writer can make is to summarize a point that is not directly stated in what "they say" but is implied or assumed.

► Although none of them have ever said so directly, my teachers have often given me the impression that education will open doors.

▶ One implication of X's treatment of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is that

X apparently assumes that

 While they rarely admit as much, \_\_\_\_\_ often take for granted that

These are templates that can help you think analytically—to look beyond what others say explicitly and to consider their unstated assumptions, as well as the implications of their views.

### TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING AN ONGOING DEBATE

Sometimes you'll want to open by summarizing a debate that presents two or more views. This kind of opening

of having to commit to a position before you are ready to can help you explore the issue you are writing about before ing process itself to help you discover where you stand instead declaring your own view. In this way, you can use the writthy guide. Furthermore, opening with a summary of a debate to look at your subject, the clear mark of someone who knows demonstrates your awareness that there are conflicting ways the subject and therefore is likely to be a reliable, trustwor-

Here is a basic template for opening with a debate.

			•
even maintain	On the other hand,	On the one hand,	In discussions of X, o
. My own view is	contends	argues	In discussions of X, one controversial issue has been

plate in an essay on the workings of the human brain The cognitive scientist Mark Aronoff uses this kind of tem-

mind of the newborn as largely unstructured, a blank slate. preprogrammed, in modern terms. The other, empiricism, sees the mind as coming into this world more or less fully formedcenturies by two opposing views. One, rationalism, sees the human Theories of how the mind/brain works have been dominated for

Mark Aronoff, "Washington Sleeped Here"

point(s) on which they ultimately disagree. proposition many people agree with in order to highlight the Another way to open with a debate involves starting with a

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agree that	When it comes to the topic of
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	the
	0
	Ä.
	숙
Where	***
this	; M
agreement	most of us will readi
usually	readily

Starting with What Others Are Saying

others maintain tha	some are convinced that, others maintain tha
. Wherea	ends, however, is on the question of

move. The political writer Thomas Frank uses a variation on this

elemental though it is said to be-remains a matter of some controversy. bitter election year. However, the exact property that divides us— That we are a nation divided is an almost universal lament of this

Тномаѕ Frank, "American Psyche"

## KEEP WHAT "THEY SAY" IN VIEW

cations you may offer, unless you keep reminding them what tant to continue to keep those ideas in view. Readers won't be as you move through the rest of your text. After summarizing able to follow your unfolding response, much less any complithe ideas you are responding to at the outset, it's very impor-We can't urge you too strongly to keep in mind what "they say" claims you are responding to.

chance that readers will forget what ideas originally motiyou should keep returning to the motivating "they say." The Here is an example. recommend that you include what we call "return sentences." beginning. At strategic moments throughout your text, we vated it-no matter how clearly you lay them out at the longer and more complicated your text, the greater the In other words, even when presenting your own claims,

ence to what others say about it. logical statements about a given subject with little or no referquestions-that good writing means making true or smart or this book to remind you of the view of writing that our book We ourselves use such return sentences at every opportunity in

saying and continue keeping it in the reader's view. tion you're entering, you need to start with what others are ference is huge. To be responsive to others and the conversasion and urgency from start to finish. In short, they help ensure than just a set of observations about a given subject. The difthat your argument is a genuine response to others' views rather return sentences ensure that your text maintains a sense of mis-By reminding readers of the ideas you're responding to,

1. The following is a list of arguments that lack a "they say" ter that you find helpful. terview. Feel free to use any of the templates in this chaprect, add to, qualify, complicate, and so forth. Your job in responding to-what view, in effect, they are trying to corthis exercise is to provide each argument with such a counthese one-sided arguments fail to explain what view they are any sense of who needs to hear these claims, who might who declares that The Sopranos presents complex characters, think otherwise. Like the speaker in the cartoon on page 4

# Starting with What Others Are Saying

- a. Our experiments suggest that there are dangerous levels of chemical X in the Ohio groundwater.
- b. Material forces drive history.
- c. Proponents of Freudian psychology question standard notions of "rationality."
- d. Male students often dominate class discussions
- e. The film is about the problems of romantic relationships.
- f. I'm afraid that templates like the ones in this book will stifle my creativity.
- 2. Below is a template that we derived from the opening of actually find laughable (or, as Zinczenko puts it, worthy movie) or any other topic that interests you. ment, sports, gender relations, the meaning of a book or of a Jay Leno monologue). You might write about one of that you support that others not only disagree with but choosing. Your first step here should be to find an idea the template to structure a passage on a topic of your own David Zinczenko's "Don't Blame the Eater" (p. 195). Use the topics listed in the previous exercise (the environ-

		1,		•
perhaps because	I happen to sympathize with, though	Whatever happened to?	logue, this was it: Isn't that like	If ever there was an idea custom-made for a Jay Leno mono

#### ₹ 0

### "HER POINT IS"

The Art of Summarizing

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IF IT IS TRUE, as we claim in this book, that to argue persuasively you need to be in dialogue with others, then summarizing others' arguments is central to your arsenal of basic moves. Because writers who make strong claims need to map their claims relative to those of other people, it is important to know how to summarize effectively what those other people say. (We're using the word "summarizing" here to refer to any information from others that you present in your own words, including that which you paraphrase.)

Many writers shy away from summarizing—perhaps because they don't want to take the trouble to go back to the text in question and wrestle with what it says, or because they fear that devoting too much time to other people's ideas will take away from their own. When assigned to write a response to an article, such writers might offer their own views on the article's topic while hardly mentioning what the article itself argues or says. At the opposite extreme are those who do nothing but summarize. Lacking confidence, perhaps, in their own ideas, these writers so overload their texts with summaries of others' ideas that their own voice gets lost. And since these summaries are not animated

### The Art of Summarizing

by the writers' own interests, they often read like mere lists of things that X thinks or Y says—with no clear focus.

As a general rule, a good summary requires balancing what the original author is saying with the writer's own focus. Generally speaking, a summary must at once be true to what the original author says while also emphasizing those aspects of what the author says that interest you, the writer. Striking this delicate balance can be tricky, since it means facing two ways at once: both outward (toward the author being summarized) and inward (toward yourself). Ultimately, it means being respectful of others but simultaneously structuring how you summarize them in light of your own text's central claim.

## On the One Hand, Put Yourself in *Their* Shoes

To write a really good summary, you must be able to suspend your own beliefs for a time and put yourself in the shoes of someone else. This means playing what the writing theorist Peter Elbow calls the "believing game," in which you try to inhabit the worldview of those whose conversation you are joining—and whom you are perhaps even disagreeing with—and try to see their argument from their perspective. This ability to temporarily suspend one's own convictions is a hallmark of good actors, who must convincingly "become" characters whom in real life they may detest. As a writer, when you play the believing game well, readers should not be able to tell whether you agree or disagree with the ideas you are summarizing.

If, as a writer, you cannot or will not suspend your own beliefs in this way, you are likely to produce summaries that are so

readers. Consider the following summary. obviously biased that they undermine your credibility with

more than an angry rant in which he accuses the fast-food com-David Zinczenko's article, "Don't Blame the Eater," is nothing panies of an evil conspiracy to make people fat. I disagree because these companies have to make money...

tone is never "angry," and he never goes so far as to suggest distortion. While Zinczenko does argue that the practices of should immediately see that this summary amounts to an unfair deliberately evil intent. that the fast-food industry conspires to make people fat with the fast-food industry have the effect of making people fat, his If you review what Zinczenko actually says (pp. 139-41), you

ences to summarize the work of others quickly, in one pithy sor Karen Lunsford (whose own research focuses on argument summary is precisely what you want. Indeed, as writing professentence or phrase, as in the following example. theory) points out, it is standard in the natural and social sciwhich, because of matters of proportion, a one- or two-sentence ficial reading. Granted, there are many writing situations in what Linczenko says but also gives the article a hasty, super-So eager is this writer to disagree that he not only caricatures mary after only one sentence and rushes on to his own response. Zinczenko a fair hearing is the hasty way he abandons the sum-Another tell-tale sign of this writer's failure to give

Harry, 2003; Tom, 1987) argue that they even have benefits. these policies are harmless; moreover, other studies (Dick, 2002; Several studies (Crackle, 1992; Pop, 2001; Snap, 1987) suggest that

### The Art of Summarizing

independent of you. like Zinczenko, you will need to tell your readers enough about But if your assignment is to respond in writing to a single author his or her argument so they can assess its merits on their own,

of the fast-food industry might be summarized as a call for overactually expressed but a familiar cliché that the writer mistakes in a rigorous or serious enough summary, he or she often falls weight people to take responsibility for their weight. in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" might be summarized not as Martin Luther King Jr.'s passionate defense of civil disobedience and mistakenly assumes the author must too). So, for example, for the author's view (sometimes because the writer believes it what gets summarized is not the view the author in question has prey to what we call "the closest cliché syndrome," in which for everyone to "just get along." Similarly, Zinczenko's critique the defense of political protest that it actually is but as a plea When a writer fails to provide enough summary or to engage

own biases and preconceptions. writer who fails to do this ends up essentially conversing with what those others have said, that you study it very closely, and writing, then, it is extremely important that you go back to imaginary others who are really only the products of his or her that you not confuse it with something you already believe. A Whenever you enter into a conversation with others in your

### KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING ON THE OTHER HAND,

porarily adopt the worldview of another, it does not mean ignor-Even as writing an effective summary requires you to tem-

while still being true to the text you are summarizing. or spin that allows the summary to fit with your own agenda quiet influence. A good summary, in other words, has a focus what it says, it also requires that your own response exert a that summarizing another text requires you to represent fairly ing your own view altogether. Paradoxically, at the same time

your own argument. claims and then make sure this general claim directly sets up to subordinate these three issues to one of Zinczenko's general If you want your essay to encompass all three topics, you'll need an essay on parenting, corporate regulation, or warning labels. try in general will call for a very different summary than will you should be able to see that an essay on the fast-food indus-Thus if you are writing in response to the essay by Zinczenko,

fast-food industry and parents. Consider this sample. pose a summary that highlights what Zinczenko says about the sity. To set up this argument, you will probably want to comnot fast-food companies, who are to blame for children's obe-For example, suppose you want to argue that it is parents,

ald's, and other chains on a regular basis, and ended up overweight. Zinczenko's hope is that with the new spate of lawsuits against the his single mother was away at work, he ate at Taco Bell, McDontoo eager to supply. When he was a young boy, for instance, and the low-cost, calorie-laden foods that the fast-food chains are all dren eat, Zinczenko claims, children today are easily victimized by parents working long hours and unable to supervise what their children's lives left by their overtaxed working parents. With many not only by failing to provide adequate warning labels on its the fast-food industry for fueling today's so-called obesity epidemic, high-calorie foods but also by filling the nutritional void in chil-In his article "Don't Blame the Eater," David Zinczenko blames

food industry, other children with working parents will have healthier choices available to them, and that they will not, like him, become obese.

eral things that parents can do to guarantee that their children eat that many of today's parents work long hours, there are still sevwho are responsible for their children's obesity. While it is true healthy foods. . . . In my view, however, it is the parents, and not the food chains,

also setting up the ensuing critique. way, the summary does justice to Zinczenko's arguments while sis on the writer's main concern: parental responsibility. In this to blame for obesity), including his two main supporting claims of Zinczenko's general argument (that the fast-food chains are establish her own argument. The opening sentence gives a sense and toward the second paragraph, where the writer begins to (about warning labels and parents), but it ends with an emphain two directions at once—both toward Zinczenko's own text The summary in the first paragraph succeeds because it points

to work on when revising what you've written. ally focuses on another. To avoid this problem, you need to marize a given author on one issue even though their text actumake sure that your "they say" and "I say" are well matched. arguments—may seem painfully obvious. But writers often sum-In fact, aligning what they say with what you say is a good thing This advice—to summarize authors in light of your own

only by words like "and then," "also," and "in addition," you If you've ever heard a talk in which the points were connected but fail to focus those points around any larger overall claim. maries that simply inventory the original author's various points interests fall prey to what might be called "list summaries," sum-Often writers who summarize without regard to their own



THE EFFECT OF A TYPICAL LIST SUMMARY

FIGURE 3

know how such lists can put listeners to sleep—as shown in Figure 3. A typical list summary sounds like this.

The author says many different things about his subject. First he says. . . . Then he makes the point that. . . . In addition he says. . . . And then he writes. . . . Also he shows that. . . . And then he says. . . .

It may be boring list summaries like this that give summaries in general a bad name and even prompt some instructors to discourage their students from summarizing at all.

In conclusion, writing a good summary means not just representing an author's view accurately, but doing so in a way that fits your own composition's larger agenda. On the one hand, it means playing Peter Elbow's believing game and doing justice to the source; if the summary ignores or misrepresents

the source, its bias and unfairness will show. On the other hand, even as it does justice to the source, a summary has to have a slant or spin that prepares the way for your own claims. Once a summary enters your text, you should think of it as joint property—reflecting both the source you are summarizing and your own views.

### SUMMARIZING SATIRICALLY

Thus far in this chapter we have argued that, as a general rule, good summaries require a balance between what someone else has said and your own interests as a writer. Now, however, we want to address one exception to this rule: the satiric summary, in which a writer deliberately gives his or her own spin to someone else's argument in order to reveal a glaring shortcoming in it. Despite our previous comments that well-crafted summaries generally strike a balance between heeding what someone else has said and your own independent interests, the satiric mode can at times be a very effective form of critique because it lets the summarized argument condemn itself without overt editorializing by you, the writer. If you've ever watched *The Daily Show*, you'll recall that it often merely summarizes silly things political leaders have said or done, letting their words or actions undermine themselves.

Consider another example. In late September 2001, former President George W. Bush in a speech to Congress urged the nation's "continued participation and confidence in the American economy" as a means of recovering from the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The journalist Allan Sloan criticized this proposal simply by summarizing it, observing that the president

where he stands—he considers Bush's proposal ridiculous, or at back at Osama bin Laden." Sloan's summary leaves no doubt cards at the mall wasn't self indulgence, it was a way to get had equated "patriotism with shopping. Maxing out your credit least too simple.

# USE SIGNAL VERBS THAT FIT THE ACTION

said. In some cases, "he says" may even drain the passion out of serviceable enough, it often fails to reflect accurately what's been says," or "they believe." Though language like this is sometimes the ideas you're summarizing. In introducing summaries, try to avoid bland formulas like "she

rate phrases like "X said." will in their writing often opt for far tamer and even less accua matter of piling up truths and bits of knowledge rather than "attacked," or "loved" something when chatting with friends a dynamic process of doing things to and with other people. summarize stems from the mistaken belief we mentioned ear-People who wouldn't hesitate to say "X totally misrepresented," lier that writing is about playing it safe and not making waves, We suspect that the habit of ignoring the action in what we

doesn't just talk about the treatment of the colonies by the indicts those companies. The Declaration of Independence simply "say" or "discuss" things; they "urge," "emphasize," and British; it protests against it. To do justice to the authors you he complains or protests that they do; he challenges, chastises, and doesn't just say that fast-food companies contribute to obesity; "complain about" them. David Zinczenko, for example, But the authors you summarize at the college level seldom

> often as possible. Though "he says" or "she believes" will someducing a quotation-you use vivid and precise signal verbs as cite, we recommend that when summarizing-or when introverbs to suit the precise actions you're describing. text will often be more accurate and lively if you tailor your times be the most appropriate language for the occasion, your

#### SUMMARIES AND QUOTATIONS TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING

- She advocates a radical revision of the juvenile justice system.
- They celebrate the fact that
- he admits.

#### SUMMARIES AND QUOTATIONS **VERBS FOR INTRODUCING**

### VERBS FOR MAKING A CLAIM

emphasize	claim	believe	assert	argue
suggest	report	remind us	observe	insist

## VERBS FOR EXPRESSING AGREEMENT

agree	admire	acknowledge
praise	extol	endorse

## VERBS FOR EXPRESSING AGREEMENT

do not deny	corroborate	celebrate the fact that
verify	support	reaffirm

# VERBS FOR QUESTIONING OR DISAGREEING

renounce reject	deny
refute	contend
qualify guestion	complain complicate

# VERBS FOR MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

exhort	encourage	demand	call for	advocate
warn	urge	recommend	plead	Imploid

#### Exercises

1. To get a feel for Peter Elbow's "believing game," write a summary of some belief that you strongly disagree with. Then write a summary of the position that you actually hold on this topic. Give both summaries to a classmate or two, and see if they can tell which position you endorse. If you've succeeded, they won't be able to tell.

### The Art of Summarizing

2. Write two different summaries of David Zinczenko's "Don't Blame the Eater" (pp. 195–97). Write the first one for an essay arguing that, contrary to what Zinczenko claims, there are inexpensive and convenient alternatives to fast-food restaurants. Write the second for an essay that questions whether being overweight is a genuine medical problem rather than a problem of cultural stereotypes. Compare your two summaries: though they are about the same article, they should look very different.