

Summary Writing

Introduction

A summary is a short explanation of the main ideas in a text. Learning to summarize is a very important skill. When writing and responding to a text (essay, article, lecture, story, novel, or video), as you are often expected to do in college, you will be expected to summarize what you read, often in the introduction of each essay you write. It takes a careful reading of a text to write a good summary, and writing a good summary will illustrate your level of comprehension of a text.

When you write a summary, you are answering the question, “What was the essay (or article, or lecture, or story, or video) really about?” Summaries vary in length depending upon the purpose of the summary and/or scope of the specific assignment given. A general summary differs from a detailed summary in that fewer supporting details are stated.

Follow the five steps outlined below to write a good summary.

Step 1: Read the text

You should read the article more than once to make sure you’ve thoroughly understood it. It’s often effective to read in three stages:

- ✓ Scan the article to get a sense of its topic and overall shape.
- ✓ Read the article carefully, highlighting important points and taking notes as you read.
- ✓ Skim the article again to confirm you’ve understood the key points, and reread any particularly important or difficult passages.

There are some tricks you can use to identify the key points as you read:

Start by reading the abstract. This already contains the author’s summary of their work, and it tells you what to expect from the article.

Pay attention to headings and subheadings. These should give you a good sense of what each part is about.

Read the introduction and the conclusion together and compare them: What did the author set out to do, and what was the outcome?

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Step 2: Break the text down into sections

To make the text more manageable and understand its sub-points, break it down into smaller sections.

If the text is a scientific paper that follows a standard empirical structure, it is probably already organized into clearly marked sections, usually including an introduction, methods, results, and discussion.

Other types of articles may not be explicitly divided into sections. But most articles and essays will be structured around a series of sub-points or themes.

Tip: To see at a glance what each part of the text focuses on, try writing a word or phrase in the margin next to each paragraph that describes the paragraph's content. If several paragraphs cover similar topics, you may group them.

Step 3: Identify the key points in each section

Keep in mind that a summary does not involve paraphrasing every single paragraph of the article. Your goal is to extract the essential points, leaving out anything that can be considered background information or supplementary detail.

In a scientific article, there are some easy questions you can ask to identify the key points in each part.

Key points of a scientific article

- Introduction
- What research question or problem was addressed?
- Are any hypotheses formulated?
- Methods
- What type of research was done?
- How were data collected and analyzed?
- Results
- What were the most important findings?
- Were the hypotheses supported?
- Discussion/conclusion
- What is the overall answer to the research question?
- How does the author explain these results?
- What are the implications of the results?
- Are there any important limitations?
- Are there any key recommendations?

If the article takes a different form, you might have to think more carefully about what points are most important for the reader to understand its argument.

In that case, pay particular attention to the thesis statement—the central claim that the author wants us to accept, which usually appears in the introduction—and the topic sentences that signal the main idea of each paragraph.

Step 4: Write the summary

Now that you know the key points that the article aims to communicate, you need to put them in your own words.

To avoid plagiarism and show you've understood the article, it's essential to properly paraphrase the author's ideas. Do not copy and paste parts of the article, not even just a sentence or two.

The best way to do this is to put the article aside and write out your understanding of the author's key points.

Step 5: Check the summary against the article

Finally, read through the article once more to ensure that:

You've accurately represented the author's work

You haven't missed any essential information

The phrasing is not too similar to any sentences in the original.

If you're summarizing many articles as part of your work, it may be a good idea to use a plagiarism checker to double-check that your text is completely original and properly cited. Just be sure to use one that's safe and reliable.

Summary Dos and Don'ts

DO:

- ✓ Report the overall topic right away
- ✓ Begin with the name of the essay and the author
- ✓ Write in the present tense
- ✓ Describe the main points covered in the text
- ✓ Include supporting details as needed depending upon the length and depth of the summary desired
- ✓ Mention any important conclusions drawn
- ✓ Use reporting verbs (see list below) to show that these are the author's ideas, not yours

DO NOT (UNLESS THE ASSIGNMENT ASKS YOU TO):

- ✓ include your own opinion about the text
- ✓ include quotations from the original text
- ✓ exceed half the length of the original text

Reporting Verbs

When writing a summary, it is very important to make it clear that you are describing the ideas in the text, not your ideas. The use of reporting verbs shows that you are reporting on someone else's (the author's) ideas. Below are some reporting verbs that you might use:

The article

- presents
- reports on
- deals with
- focuses on
- examines
- covers
- describes
- addresses

The author

- states
- claims
- argues
- criticizes
- describes
- concluded with the idea
- concluded by saying

The researchers

- state
- claim
- report

The Purpose of Summarizing

Imagine your friend notices you reading a novel and asks what the novel is about. To answer your friend, you would provide a summary of the novel highlighting its main points. The summary you provide to your friend will help them make an

informed decision about whether or not they too might be interested in reading the novel.

Pick a Novel

Pick a novel that you would like to read. This must be a novel you have not previously read and must be approved by your teacher.

Provide a Summary

Once you have finished reading the novel, type up a summary of the novel. Your summary must be no more than two paragraphs of four to five sentences each. Use the following to guide what you include in your summary:

- Who is the author of the novel?
- What are the main events of the novel?
- Which characters are involved in these events?
- Where and when does the novel take place?

Don't Forget

Remember, a summary should not include any personal opinions. Thus, your summary should not include your opinions regarding whether or not you liked the novel, only the facts of the novel.

Sample Article

Example of a full article summary

Davis et al. (2015) set out to empirically test the popular saying “an apple a day keeps the doctor away.” Apples are often used to represent a healthy lifestyle, and research has shown their nutritional properties could be beneficial for various aspects of health. The authors’ unique approach is to take the saying literally and ask: do people who eat apples use healthcare services less frequently? If there is indeed such a relationship, they suggest, promoting apple consumption could help reduce healthcare costs.

The study used publicly available cross-sectional data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Participants were categorized as either apple eaters or non-apple eaters based on their self-reported apple consumption in an average 24-hour period. They were also categorized as either avoiding or not avoiding the use of healthcare services in the past year. The data were statistically analyzed to test whether there was an association between apple consumption and several dependent variables: physician visits, hospital stays, use of mental health services, and use of prescription medication.

Although apple eaters were slightly more likely to have avoided physician visits, this relationship was not statistically significant after adjusting for various relevant factors. No association was found between apple consumption and hospital stays or mental health service use. However, apple eaters were found to be slightly more likely to have avoided using prescription medication. Based on these results, the authors conclude that an apple a day does not keep the doctor away, but it may keep the pharmacist away. They suggest that this finding could have implications for reducing healthcare costs, considering the high annual costs of prescription medication and the inexpensiveness of apples.

However, the authors also note several limitations of the study: most importantly, that apple eaters are likely to differ from non-apple eaters in ways that may have confounded the results (for example, apple eaters may be more likely to be health-conscious). To establish any causal relationship between apple consumption and avoidance of medication, they recommend experimental research.

Example of a concise article summary

Using national survey data, Davis et al. (2015) tested the assertion that “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” and did not find statistically significant evidence to support this hypothesis. While people who consumed apples were slightly less likely to use prescription medications, the study was unable to demonstrate a causal relationship between these variables.

Citing the source you’re summarizing

When including a summary as part of a larger text, it’s essential to properly cite the source you’re summarizing. The exact format depends on your citation style, but it usually includes an in-text citation and a full reference at the end of your paper.

Summary Writing Format

- When writing a summary, remember that it should be in the form of a paragraph.
- A summary begins with an introductory sentence that states the text’s title, author and main point of the text as you see it.
- A summary is written in your own words.
- A summary contains only the ideas of the original text. Do not insert any of your own opinions, interpretations, deductions or comments into a summary.
- Identify in order the significant sub-claims the author uses to defend the main point.

- Copy word-for-word three separate passages from the essay that you think support and/or defend the main point of the essay as you see it.
- Cite each passage by first signaling the work and the author, put “quotation marks” around the passage you chose, and put the number of the paragraph where the passages can be found immediately after the passage.
- Using source material from the essay is important. Why? Because defending claims with source material is what you will be asked to do when writing papers for your college professors.
- Write a last sentence that “wraps” up your summary; often a simple rephrasing of the main point.

4 Tips for Writing a Good Summary

1. Find the main idea. A useful summary distills the source material down to its most important point to inform the reader. Pick the major point you want to communicate to the reader, and use your limited sentences wisely to convey it. Take down a few notes to help outline your thoughts in an organized manner.

2. Keep it brief. A summary is not a rewrite—it’s a short summation of the original piece. A summary paragraph is usually around five to eight sentences. Keep it short and to the point. Eliminate redundancies or repetitive text to keep your paragraph clear and concise.

3. Write without judgment. If you are summarizing an original text or piece of media, you are gathering and condensing its most relevant information, not writing a review. Write your summary in your own words, and avoid adding your opinion.

4. Make sure it flows. Transitions are incredibly helpful when it comes to building momentum in your writing. Connect your sentences with transition words, making sure they flow together and convey your summary clearly.

References:

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