

Summaries

There are two kinds of summaries: summaries that are part of a larger paper (the most common kind) and free-standing or standalone summaries, sometimes called **summary essays**.

The Summary: Key Points to Remember

- Use your own words
- Be objective
- Do not include your own opinion; do not interpret the material or argue the material
- Condense the material from the original; be brief, shorter than the original
- Present the original material in a nutshell
- Mention only main points
- Concentrate on big ideas and main points
- Do not use details, facts, examples, quotations, or other specifics
- Use original order or change the order of the material

Stand-alone Summary Essays

Sometimes you will write a summary to be a complete essay in itself rather than being a part of another kind of essay. Generally, you will follow the same guidelines as you would for a shorter summary. However, there are a few differences.

A Summary Essay should:

- Identify the original source and author
- Give the thesis of the source
- Generally follow the organization of the original
- Have a conclusion that shows an understanding of the source as a whole.

In addition, a Summary Essay may:

- Have a few key details, facts, examples, paraphrases, or quotations
- Have an interesting introductory or lead sentence

If you use details, facts, examples, paraphrases, or quotations in your summary essay, be sure to use internal documentation.

There are several types of summaries:

An informative abstract

includes conclusions and indicates results or cause. When writing an informative abstract, think of it as a **table of contents in sentence form**. The table of contents of a report is, in effect, the final outline; it is easily fleshed out into an abstract.

All abstracts share these characteristics:

- (a) the writer never uses "I", passive voice is used instead;
- (b) footnotes are never used;
- (c) abbreviations must not be used, unless they are explained in the abstract.

An evaluative summary

When you write an evaluative summary, follow the same guidelines, but **include your opinion of the material you are summarising**. Blend **your evaluation** with the summary—don't summarize first and then provide a critique at the end.

Consider these questions: How carefully is the subject researched? Is the writer or speaker objective? Does the work achieve its goal? Is the material relevant to your readers? Is the material readable? What kind of vocabulary does the writer or speaker use? What visuals are included?

An executive summary

An executive summary is found at the **beginning of a formal proposal or long report**. It is usually **one or two pages** and **condenses the most important points** for a busy manager. It is **self-contained** and can stand on its own, like the report itself. An executive summary should begin with the **purpose and scope** of the report, relate the purpose to a **key problem**, give in non-technical language the **criteria used to solve the problem**, **condense the findings**, **stress the conclusions**, and **provide recommendations**.

Adapted from Kolin, P. Successful Writing at Work. (Houghton-Mifflin).

Preparing a good summary

Follow these steps:

1. **Read** the material **thoroughly**. Look at **visual cues** such as headings, subheadings, and words in boldface and italics to identify the main ideas.
2. **Read** the material **again**, now **underlining** or **taking notes** of the **main points**. Look for such **pointers** as first, second, and words that express **causation** (accordingly, therefore); words that express **contrasts and comparisons** (furthermore, however), and words that signal essentials (basically, principal). The first and last sentences of each paragraph are very often important.
3. Organise the information into a draft summary. Use the language of the original, together with any necessary **connective words or phrases** of your own.
4. **Revise your draft** and delete whatever you can. Do not get stuck on the "surface level" of the original text. For example, if there is a listing of details, see how many of your underlined points you might combine, condense, or eliminate. **Check your draft against the original for accuracy.**
5. Put the revised version into your **own words**. Make sure your version **eliminates unnecessary words**, and **compare it with the original for accuracy.**
6. **Edit** your summary, making sure that the summary is **clear** and **concise**. **Keep the prospective readers in mind** - they will probably never access the original material.
7. **Identify the source** that you have summarized. Include **bibliographic information** in the title or a footnote or endnote.