

Writing A Summary

Summary: A condensation and restatement of source material in one's own words and sentence structures, useful in reading for comprehending the material and in research writing for presenting the gist of the original author's idea. Summaries appearing in a paper must always be acknowledged in source citations.

(from Fowler, H. Ramsey et al. *The Little Brown Handbook*. 4th Canadian Ed. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2005)

The ability to write an accurate summary will prove indispensable in any profession that entails written communication. Summaries are used to present material that is dense, detailed, or lengthy in a manner that is clear, concise, and easily understood. In an academic context, you will find summarizing useful in two key ways: to condense information that you are studying through the process of note-taking and to meaningfully incorporate the ideas of others into your research papers.

A summary:

1. is usually no more than one-fifth to one-quarter the length of the original.
2. when it is part of an argumentative or research paper, a summary *only* covers materials that are necessary to your argument.
3. focuses on the main argument of the original, usually omitting all but the most important and relevant details.
4. is accurate; it may represent the author's bias if one is obvious, but you should leave your own feelings about the text out of your summary.
5. may reorganize the order in which points are presented in the original if this will make the argument clearer.
6. is in the present tense.

A summary does not:

1. introduce any ideas not found in the original.
2. change the proportion of the emphasis of the original.
3. introduce your own opinion of the materials.

How to write a summary:

1. *Understand.* Work through the original materials carefully as many times as it takes to understand a) its organization, b) its thesis, argument, or main point, and c) its vocabulary or terminology.
2. *Outline.* Write a paragraph outline for short texts or a formal outline for longer ones. This will map the organization of the essay for you, and it will help you to see the main points of the argument that you should emphasize in your summary.
3. *Draft.* Working from your outline, write a first draft of a summary. Make sure you identify the title of the materials in the first sentence as well as the author's thesis or controlling idea. Then, state each of the original material's main points, including any explanation or clarification these points need. The latter may be particularly important if your summary is part of your own

argumentative essay, in which case you will need to prepare your own reader to see how the original material's main points relate to your own thesis.

4. *Revise*. Revise your draft for coherence and concision. Make sure your summary is more than a shopping list of points. A good summary will retain a sense of the *connection* between points. If a word, phrase, or sentence is not *truly necessary* to your summary, *cut it*—summaries are as concise as possible.
5. *Cite*. Be sure to acknowledge *all* your sources in your bibliography or works cited page.

Summary Checklist:

Use the following checklist to critique your own summaries or those of your peers.

	Yes	Poor	No
The first sentence gives the title and author of the original work.			
The essay's thesis is clearly stated and concisely worded.			
Each main point of the original is restated clearly in the summary.			
Each main point is briefly explained (if needed).			
The summary contains <i>no</i> secondary details, ideas, or opinions that could be eliminated without diminishing the reader's understanding.			
The summary is balanced and objective.			
The paragraph(s) of the summary flow smoothly, and sentences make a clear connection to the preceding and proceeding materials.			
There are no obvious errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.			