

Succeeding with Summaries

Created using Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum
Updated for the Writers Lab by Sherri Wahrer

During the course of constructing your own written opinion or argument on an issue that you've been researching, you'll often have to do something else: summarize what other sources have said regarding the same issue. Why is it important that you do this? Because your reader may be unfamiliar with the issue (and would benefit from background information on it). Also, there's the possibility that your reader may not agree with (or may be surprised by) your stance on the issue (and is therefore interested in how you arrived at your conclusion). This handout is intended to help you succeed at composing summaries, which can be tricky forms of writing considering the wealth of information needing to be condensed. Before moving on, however, it's important to understand what a summary is (and is not). In a nutshell, the definition of a summary is this: it is a brief restatement, in your own words, of the content of a passage. This means that your job as summarizer is to simply recap the main points of a text for your reader; your job is not to pass judgment on the text at this point (you'll probably do that in the body of your paper, as you use the summarized text to support or counteract your own ideas). That said, let's move on to the characteristics of summaries.

Characteristics

- The summary should focus only on the central idea of the text.
- Summaries include the main points within the text that support its central idea.
- Some summaries will include relevant examples from the text (if appropriate).
- Summaries should always include the name of the author and title of the text.
- It is a good idea to begin a summary with a clear statement of the text's thesis (its central point).
- Summary lengths can differ (consult your assignment guidelines or ask your instructor what s/he expects). One rule of thumb, suggested by Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum, indicates that summaries should be around one-fourth the size of the original text. However, you'll also need to consider how long the summary should be in relation to your own paper; you don't want the summary to take over your work!

Now, moving right along...

How to Write Summaries

- Carefully read the text you are to summarize; determine its structure.
- Identify the author's purpose for writing the text (to explain, persuade, inform, etc.); this will help you to distinguish the important information you'll want to include in your summary.
- Categorize the text, listing the stages of thought you see present (in the form of single-sentence theses). Use a highlighter to mark key terms and ideas, or make notes in the margins.
- Write a makeshift thesis for the entire text based on the categorizations you've made and the key ideas you've noted. The thesis should express the central idea of the text as a whole.
- Write a draft of your summary by combining the thesis with your single-sentence, stages-of-thought theses. Include significant details, and eliminate minor details. Use brief statements to convey main ideas; summaries suffer in the hands of wordiness!
- Compare and contrast your summary with the original text to check for accuracy and to make any necessary adjustments. Of course, also proofread for grammatical correctness!