

Summary Writing

Writing summaries is a very important but challenging skill. Summarizing is also a very common academic activity. Teachers and professors often require summary papers because when we clearly summarize a reading, we show that we have clearly interpreted and understood it. Writing a summary of a reading is also an excellent way to remember what we have read because it helps us to focus on the author's main ideas.

A summary is basically a shorter version of a reading. Summaries are one-tenth to one-fourth the length of the original. When you summarize, first find the author's main idea of the whole reading (thesis) and main supporting idea in each paragraph. Leave out small, unimportant details and examples. Then paraphrase those ideas, which means write those ideas in your own words. Since you are writing the author's main ideas in your own words, a summary is really a collection of paraphrases.

BASIC STEPS IN WRITING A SUMMARY

1. Find the one main idea (thesis) for the entire reading.
2. Find the main supporting ideas in the reading. Usually, each paragraph has one main supporting idea.
3. Make an outline of the reading that includes all of the main ideas.
4. Use your outline to write a draft of your summary. Make sure that you **paraphrase (don't copy)** the author's ideas.
5. Add an introductory sentence at the beginning. This will include the author's thesis. (See below.)
6. Add a concluding sentence at the end. (See below.)
7. Compare your summary with the "Summary Checklist."
8. Revise your draft for grammar and clarity.

WRITE AN INTRODUCTORY SENTENCE

You must give credit to the author, which means you must tell us who wrote the original reading. In the U.S. academic world, we must always give credit to original authors. If we don't, it is considered plagiarism or stealing.

The introductory sentence includes the title of the reading in quotation marks, the author's first and last name, and the author's thesis.

Example:

In the article “The Urge to Explore,” David Dobbs claims that the desire to explore our world is essential to human nature.

(Note that the comma goes inside the quotation marks. Periods also go inside quotation marks.)

WRITE A CONCLUDING SENTENCE

The last sentence of your summary should be a concluding sentence that gives the summary a sense of closure. You might find a good sentence to paraphrase for this in the last paragraph of the reading.

Example: The human species is curious, and we explore just to see what we can find.

MENTION THE AUTHOR’S NAME AGAIN

You need to mention the author’s **last** name at least one more time near the end of your summary. This reminds us that you are summarizing the ideas of someone else.

Examples:

Dobbs goes on to say...

Dobbs also points out that...

Dobbs concludes by saying...

LEAVE OUT DETAILS AND YOUR OPINION

Only write the main ideas, not details. Don’t add your own ideas or opinion.

Example of deleted detail:

“...people long ago who had explored...this vast ocean without any of the navigational tools...”

LENGTH

In most academic reading, each body paragraph has one main supporting idea. Therefore, your summary will consist of one sentence for each body paragraph plus one introductory sentence and one concluding sentence.

FINAL TIPS

If you don’t understand the reading, you won’t be able to write a good summary. Spend lots of time with the reading and make sure you understand it before you start writing your summary.

Write your summary in paragraph format. Use transitions to create a smooth, clear summary.