

SUMMARIZING: THE AUTHOR'S MAIN IDEAS

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Summary, like paraphrase, allows you to reproduce another writer's thoughts—but in shortened form. In writing a summary, you focus on the most important statements of the original passage and eliminate the less important material. Four techniques—*deleting*, *selecting*, *note taking*, and *miniaturizing*—can help you shorten the material. As you become more adept at summarizing you will devise your own combination of these techniques for each occasion. But in all cases, the summary must be written in readable prose that reflects the essential meaning of the original text. Like paraphrase, summary can be used for many purposes: to help you understand the main points and structure of an author's argument, to convey that understanding to others, to present background information quickly, or to refer to another writer's ideas in the course of making your own original statement.

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Writing a Summary

The word-by-word attention required for a good paraphrase will lead you across all the contours of another writer's thought. You will follow the main trail of meaning, the ridges of fine distinctions, the cutbacks of qualifications, and the waysides of association. Like a patient hiker on a slow trek, you must mentally pull together all the major events of the journey in order to sense the total experience. Writing a summary, on the other hand, allows you to review the entire process as a whole.

Unlike the paraphrase writer, who must discover new ways to restate the meaning, the summarizer looks for the most compact restatement. To highlight the essentials of another writer's idea—rather than to provide a complete and detailed restatement—is the purpose of summary writing. A summary will help you understand the major direction, the main points, and the overall shape of the more detailed original. A summary restates the essence of the original in as few words as possible, but not necessarily in different words. In most cases, when you use an author's original words, you need to put them in quotation marks, as discussed in Chapter 18. When you are writing a freestanding summary for which the source is given and which is labeled as a summary of that source (and only in this situation), you need not mark by quotation marks the use of the author's words. Remember that when you use a summary in the course of your own writing, you must use your own words or mark the use of the author's words with quotation marks.

To rewrite a longer piece in short form, you must first understand the piece you are working with. Begin by reading the piece carefully, making sure you absorb the full meaning. If there are words you do not know, look them up. If some sentences are confusing, paraphrase them. Identify the main ideas and determine how the less important material relates to those main ideas. In short, read.

Once you understand the piece you are summarizing, you must decide which parts you are going to include in the summary and which you are going to leave out. Of course, how much material you select depends on how long you want the summary to be and for what purpose you are going to use the summary. (We will discuss these issues in the latter part of this chapter.) However, unless you have a more specific ratio in mind, you should generally try to create a summary about one-fifth to one-quarter the length of the original.

This chapter presents four methods for choosing the material to include in a summary: deleting, selecting, note taking, and miniaturizing. The methods overlap somewhat. By deleting, for example, you in effect select the material that remains. Miniaturizing is only a structurally focused version of note taking. A good summary takes into account all four methods.

and in practice people switch back and forth among them. Because each of these methods emphasizes slightly different skills, however, we will discuss them separately. Through the somewhat artificial separation and isolated practice of these skills, you will master the art of making concise and exact summaries. After you gain control of all the methods, you will be able to combine them as you see fit. Before we discuss these methods, however, let us briefly examine the steps in writing a summary.

Informative and Descriptive Summaries

Having selected the material to include in your summary, you must then decide whether your summary will be informative or descriptive. *Informative summaries* adopt the tone of the original full text, simply presenting the information it contains in shorter form. *Descriptive summaries* adopt a more distant perspective, describing the original text rather than directly presenting the information it contains. An informative summary of the Declaration of Independence might begin as follows:

When people declare themselves independent of their political ties, they should give reasons. Governments are formed to protect equality and rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If government does not do this, people can change the government.

A descriptive summary of the same passage might begin:

Jefferson opens the Declaration of Independence by stating that a country declaring independence needs to give its reasons. He goes on to discuss the purposes of government in protecting individual rights and the legitimacy of change if government does not live up to its obligations.

Note that the informative summary does not mention the author or title of the piece but rather gets right down to the content. Thus it can present more information more compactly and more precisely. *For most purposes, informative summaries are preferable to descriptive summaries.* (All the summaries in this chapter are informative.) In addition, when research material is simply reported for its factual content, as in the paper on synthesis on pages 236–239, the informative summary is used.

On the other hand, descriptive summaries give a more nearly complete picture of the structure of the original. Descriptive summaries also establish a certain distance between the writer of the summary and the writer of the original piece. This sense of objectivity is useful whenever the summarized material is to be analyzed, evaluated, or otherwise discussed. Hence descriptive summaries should be used in book reviews (see Chapter 8), in

essays of analysis (see, for example, pages 192–194), and in other essays discussing a text (see, for example, pages 157–159).

The Summary as Writing

The key to writing an effective summary is combining the material you choose to include into concise, coherent sentences and paragraphs. If your sentences are carelessly formed, not only will the summary be unreadable but you will also lose the connection among the pieces of information in the summary. You could simply wind up with tossed word salad. On the other hand, carefully written sentences can help show how the separate facts and ideas fit together to build the meaning of the whole. Thoughtful word choice and sentence structure can help you reduce a summary by half with no loss of information, ideas, or clarity. (Chapter 17 offers suggestions for sharpening your phrasing.) Incidentally, because the summary form places such a premium on conciseness and clarity, writing summaries provide excellent practice for the improvement of your general writing style.

Because you are taking information from many parts of the original text, you could easily lose sight of the logical structure of the whole piece. You need to pay close attention to the new transitions and paragraph structure of the summary. Rather than running all the information together in a series of seemingly unrelated sentences, you can use transitions to show the connection between sentences, and you can create new paragraphs to reflect large divisions in the original material.

Finally, in your finished draft of the summary, be sure you identify the source of the original material in a heading, an introductory phrase, or a footnote. When summaries stand by themselves, the source usually appears in the heading. When summaries are worked into the course of longer arguments, you can cite the source of your material in an introductory phrase or a footnote without interrupting the flow of your argument.

Steps in Writing a Summary

1. Read the original carefully.
2. Choose material for the summary.
3. Decide whether your summary will be informative or descriptive.
4. Rewrite the material in concise, coherent sentences and paragraphs.
5. Identify the source of the original text.