

Summary As Method

At some point almost every writer needs to summarize external sources when writing an essay. A summary puts into concise form the essential information or ideas of a source text (for example, an essay, article, book, film, government memo, etc.). The length of a summary may range anywhere from a few sentences to a few paragraphs, depending on the length of the source text and the level of detail you want to go into in the summary. Any writing task that engages with outside sources, authors, and ideas will utilize summary or paraphrase as a method of establishing the broader conversation in which the paper engages. We might think of summary as a method of laying the preliminary foundation or terrain of an essay, relative to which the writers can then distinguish their own particular argument, concerns, or voice.

When writing an essay, keep in mind the difference among quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing. Writers make very specific and deliberate choices in determining how best to recapitulate other's ideas.

- QUOTING:
 - A direct quotation means you have borrowed the **exact words** from the original source. You must enclose these words in quotation marks.
 - You may choose to quote directly if the wording of your text is so memorable or powerful, or expresses a point so perfectly, that you cannot change it without weakening the meaning. You may also choose to quote directly if your source is a respected and well-known authority whose ideas support your own opinions. Or you may choose to quote directly if you want to emphasize the fact that your opinions differ great from that of your source.
- PARAPHRASING:
 - A paraphrase simply rewrites a source's sentence(s) in your own words. Paraphrases tend to be approximately the same length as the original.
 - You may choose to paraphrase if the content and details of a particular passage are important to your point, but the rhetoric of that passage is not imperative to conveying the argument.
- SUMMARIZING:
 - A summary is the condensation of a longer passage, essay, chapter, or entire book into just a few sentences.
 - You may choose to summarize if the main point of a long text is important but the specific details are not.

For more information on deciding when to quote, paraphrase, or summarize, see our Quotation Handout: http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/quotations.original.pdf.

Actions to Take When Writing Summaries

- Read and re-read the original text closely. Try writing one-sentence summaries of each paragraph, idea, or section as you read, putting the source's concepts in your own words. Summarizing should be concise, a way of minimizing rather than adding bulk to your paper.
- **DON'T PLAGIARIZE.** Be careful to paraphrase information, using your own words rather than lifting words or phrases from the source text. Students sometimes plagiarize inadvertently—that is, without even realizing they are doing so. This is particularly common when students know a text so well that they end up reproducing the author's exact words without intending to. Remember to distinguish your summarizing voice from that of the original author(s): always use quotation marks if you quote directly.
- Avoid putting your own opinions or analysis into the summary. Although you necessarily need to make judgments about what information warrants inclusion, a summary should be as objective as possible.
- Remember that it is an imperative first to summarize a text's argument as fairly and accurately as possible. Only after this step can you go on to assess a text's usefulness or limitations. In other words, summary must precede analysis.

Summary As Genre

Sometimes students are asked to write an essay-length summary of a work or works. These are sometimes called critical summaries or *précis*. This genre of academic writing generally asks the writer to convey a deeper understanding of the overall argument rather than simply paraphrase specific ideas of the source text. The critical summary requires that the writer explain the formal construction of the argument—both its logical premises and the larger critical and disciplinary conversation the source text addresses. Critical summaries often serve as the first step in writing a literature review. For more information on Literature Reviews, see our Handout: http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/lit-review-1.original.pdf.

Actions to take when writing critical summaries or *précis*

- Again, read and re-read the original text carefully. Identify the thesis. Pay close attention to the topic and concluding sentences in paragraphs as well as the introduction and conclusion of the text. Look for transitional words and phrases in the text that will alert you to the argument's deeper logical structure: “therefore . . . thus . . . thereby . . . since . . .” Make note of the author's sources and the types of evidence they are using.
- Resist the urge to argue or critique right away. Sometimes you will be asked to analyze the argument, but generally any analysis will be presented at the end of the critical summary after you have mapped out the overall claim and what evidence has been presented.
- Try to avoid excessive quotations. Quoting the author's own words can be very effective when you want to highlight an important point in their argument. A critical summary composed of quotations, however, can signal that you are reproducing rather than explaining the text. Additionally, quoting too much can suggest a sort of academic laziness—that is, relying on the words of the text rather than doing the difficult task of summarizing the text yourself.