

HOW TO WRITE A SUMMARY FOR THE FINAL EXAM

WHAT IS IT?

A summary is a short, concise method of stating the main idea and significant supporting details of a reading selection or textbook chapter. A summary condenses a larger piece of work down to its essential parts.

A summary is not a rewrite of the original piece and does not have to be long nor should it be long. To write a summary, use your own words to express briefly the main idea and relevant details of the piece you have read. Your purpose in writing the summary is to give the basic ideas of the original reading. What was it about and what did the author want to communicate?

Writing a good summary demonstrates that you clearly understand a text and that you can communicate that understanding to your readers. A summary can be tricky to write at first because it's tempting to include too much or too little information.

What are chapter summaries? A chapter summary is a condensed version of the major action in a book. A chapter summary will provide key points of action in the narrative, identify primary (and sometimes secondary) characters, and convey where the action takes place. Later chapter summaries may also briefly revisit events that transpired in earlier chapters.

WHAT A SUMMARY IS NOT?

- Your opinion
- What you think the author should have said
- Copied material or a string of quotes from the selection

HOW TO START WITH READING THE TEXT?

1) Divide...and conquer. First off, skim the text you are going to summarize and divide it into sections. Focus on any headings and subheadings. Also look at any bold-faced terms and make sure you understand them before you read.

Don't take any notes this time -- just take in the bare minimum to wrap your mind around the basic plot of the book or article. You'll be able to concentrate on the smaller things later.

Think of the focus while you're reading. Get down the most basic of questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? This bare bones thinking can help you to effectively and quickly write a pertinent summary.

2) Read. Now that you've prepared, go ahead and read the selection. Read straight through. At this point, you don't need to stop to look up anything that gives you trouble—just get a feel for the author's tone, style, and main idea.

In order to write an accurate summary, you must understand what you're reading. Try reading with the author's purpose in mind.

Take notes and highlight as you read. Take note of the subheadings, even if there aren't any. Dividing it into sections in your mind will help you organize your summary.

Write down the author's main point and the main points of each section. Look for the writer's thesis and underline it. This is the main idea of the work.

3) Reread. Rereading should be *active* reading. Underline topic sentences and key facts. Label areas that you want to refer to as you write your summary. Also label areas that should be avoided because the details—though they may be interesting—are too specific. Identify areas that you do not understand and try to clarify those points.

4) One sentence at a time. You should now have a firm grasp on the text you will be summarizing. In steps 1–3, you divided the piece into sections and located the author's main ideas and points. Now write down the main idea of each section in one well-developed sentence. Make sure that what you include in your sentences are key points, not minor details.

5) Write a thesis statement. This is the key to any well-written summary. Review the sentences you wrote in step 4. From them, you should be able to create a thesis statement that clearly communicates what the entire text was trying to achieve. If you find that you are

not able to do this step, then you should go back and make sure your sentences actually addressed key points.

6) Ready to write. At this point, your first draft is virtually done. You can use the thesis statement as the introductory sentence of your summary, and your other sentences can make up the body. Make sure that they are in order. Add some transition words (*then, however, also, moreover*) that help with the overall structure and flow of the summary. And once you are actually putting pen to paper (or fingers to keys!), remember these tips:

- Write in the present tense.
- Make sure to include the author and title of the work.
- Be concise: a summary should not be equal in length to the original text.
- If you must use the words of the author, cite them.
- Don't put your own opinions, ideas, or interpretations into the summary. The purpose of writing a summary is to accurately represent what the author wanted to say, not to provide a critique.

7) Check for accuracy. Reread your summary and make certain that you have accurately represented the author's ideas and key points. Make sure that you have correctly cited anything directly quoted from the text. Also check to make sure that your text does not contain your own commentary on the piece.

8) Revise. Once you are certain that your summary is accurate, you should (as with any piece of writing) revise it for style, grammar, and punctuation. If you have time, give your summary to someone else to read. This person should be able to understand the main text based on your summary alone. If he or she does not, you may have focused too much on one area of the piece and not enough on the author's main idea.

Sometimes, the central idea of the piece is stated in the introduction or first paragraph, and the supporting ideas of this central idea are presented one by one in the following paragraphs. Always read the introductory paragraph thoughtfully and look for a thesis statement. Finding the thesis statement is like finding a key to a locked door. Frequently, however, the thesis, or central idea, is implied or suggested. Thus, you will have to work harder to figure out what the author wants readers to understand. Use any hints that may shed light on the meaning of the piece: pay attention to the title and any headings and to the opening and closing lines of paragraphs.

STRUCTURE OF THE SUMMARY

A summary essay should be organized so that others can understand the source or evaluate your comprehension of it. Your summary should have 3 parts:



a. The introduction (usually one paragraph)

Give background information about the field of research addressed in this paper. What is the process being studied? What is the goal of the research? What fundamental question are they trying to answer? What is their hypothesis?

Contains a one-sentence thesis statement that sums up the main point of the source. This thesis statement is not your main point; it is the main point of your source. Usually, though, you have to write this statement rather than quote it from the source text. It is a one-sentence summary of the entire text that your essay summarizes.

- (i) Gives the title of the source (following the citation guidelines of whatever style sheet you are using);
- (ii) Provides the name of the author of the source;
- (ii) Sometimes also provides pertinent background information about the author of the source or about the text to be summarized.

The introduction should not offer your own opinions or evaluation of the text you are summarizing.

b. The body of a summary essay (more paragraphs):

This paraphrases and condenses the original piece. In your summary, be sure that you:

- Include important data but omit minor points;
- Include one or more of the author's examples or illustrations (these will bring your summary to life);
- Do not include your own ideas, illustrations, metaphors, or interpretations. Look upon yourself as a summarizing machine; you are simply repeating what the source text says, in fewer words and in your own words. But the fact that you are using your own words does not mean that you are including your own ideas.

c. There is customarily no conclusion to a summary essay.

When you have summarized the source text, your summary essay is finished. Do not add your own concluding paragraph unless your teacher specifically tells you to.

SUMMARY VERBS

In a longer summary, remind your reader that you are paraphrasing by using "reminder phrases," such as:

- The author goes on to say that ...
- The article (author) further states that ...
- (Author's last name) also states/maintains/argues that ...
- (Author's last name) also believes that ...
- (Author's last name) concludes that

What does the author do in the text?

| | | |
|------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| says | explains | comments |
| persuades | suggests | understands |
| argues | reminds | helps us understand |
| elucidates | presents | intimates |
| concludes | presents the idea | creates the impression |

Use these verbs to help you organize your summary:

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| acknowledges | compares | describes | features | predicts |
| adds | confirms | discourages | furnishes | proposes |
| advises | confronts | encourages | identifies | provides |
| answers | confuses | endorses | illustrates | recommends |
| asks | considers | entertains | invites | simplifies |
| asserts | contrasts | entices | judges | solves |
| assures | critiques | enumerates | mentions | suggests |
| blames | defends | evaluates | names | supports |
| captures | demonstrates | explores | offends | teaches |
| clarifies | denounces | expresses | offers | tells |
| classifies | depicts | explains | praises | traces |

REMEMBER:

- Do not rewrite the original piece.
- Start your summary with a clear identification of the type of work, title, author, and main point in the present tense.
- Write using "summarizing language." Periodically remind your reader that this is a summary by using phrases such as *the article claims*, *the author suggests*, etc.
- Never put any of your own ideas, opinions, or interpretations into the summary. This means you have to be very careful of your word choice.
- Keep your summary short.
- Use your own wording.
- Refer to the central and main ideas of the original piece.
- Read with who, what, when, where, why and how questions in mind.
- Do not put in your opinion of the issue or topic discussed in the original piece.
- The material should be presented in a neutral fashion
- Also do not include anything that does not appear in the original. (Do not include your own comments or evaluation)
- Be sure to identify your source.