

Introduction to Summarizing

A. What Is a Summary?

A summary is a condensed overview of the main idea(s) and essential details of a longer work (e.g., an article or story). A summary should be objective and concise. It should be able to stand alone as its own work. The target audience is a reader who is not familiar with the original work.

B. What a Summary Is NOT

When you summarize, you use your own words but NOT your own opinions, ideas, or interpretations. You use attributive tags (e.g., *the author suggests...*) to show that the ideas are not your own.

A summary is NOT an outline. An outline is a summary in point form. You can write an outline first. Then you can use your notes to write a summary in paragraph form. A summary may be one paragraph or a few, depending on the length of the original work.

A summary does NOT include specific details such as dates, times, and statistics.

3 Reasons for Summarizing

There are many different reasons your teacher, employer, or friend may ask you to summarize something. Here are few of the main reasons why it's important to learn this skill.

#	Reason	Explanation
1	to demonstrate comprehension	If you can write a summary, you know what a text is about. In an academic setting, it is important for your instructor to know that you understand the main idea of the content.
2	to find the important parts	An important reading skill is being able to easily find the most important parts and to ignore the parts that aren't essential. Summary writing requires you to practise and demonstrate this real-life skill.
3	to report to others	In the real world, you often need to summarize content to help others learn what they have missed. In a work setting, your colleagues may be unable to attend a presentation or read a report. In an academic setting, you may need to summarize a lecture that a friend missed.

Formatting a Summary

A summary is formatted in paragraph form. One paragraph is long enough to summarize a short article, story, or film.* A summary is usually written in the present tense. It follows the traditional format of a paragraph. It should include:

1. an introductory (topic) sentence (includes the title and author) that briefly tells the reader what the piece is about
2. three to five supporting sentences that relate to the central idea (about one sentence per section of original text, in logical order)
3. attributive tags to show that thoughts are not the writer's own (avoid direct quotes if possible)
4. a concluding sentence that rephrases the main idea

SENTENCE STARTERS FOR SUMMARIZING

How you word your summary is important. You need to be concise and objective. Here are some useful words and phrases to use in your summary. Keep this page handy when you move on to the Writing Challenge.

Use	Useful Words & Phrases	
Introductory Sentence	• In “ _____ ”, _____ covers/writes about/discusses _____ . (title) (author) (main idea / theme) • As _____ explains in “ _____ ”, ... (author) (title) • _____, in “ _____ ”, focuses on... (Author) (title)	
Main Idea	• The piece covers... • “ _____ ” is a story about... (Title)	• The article/piece is mainly about... • The main point the author makes is...
Relevant Details	• As _____ notes/tells us, ... (author) • The article/piece/text says that... • According to _____, ... (author)	• A report about _____ claims that... (topic) • _____ argues that... (Author)
Summing Up	• In short, ... • To summarize, ... • In summary, ...	• In brief, ... • To conclude, ... • As mentioned, ...

Writing a Summary

A STEP-BASED APPROACH

When summarizing in writing, use paragraph form. You can summarize a short article in a single paragraph. It may take a few paragraphs to summarize a longer work, such as a novel.

Follow these steps to create a summary of a short text, such as an article.

1. Read the article once.
2. Reread the article armed with a pen and a blank piece of paper.
3. As you reread, write down the title and author of the original work.
4. Find the main idea. (*Why was this text written?*) Circle it.
5. Divide the article into its main sections. Draw boxes around them.
6. Place a star beside one important detail in each box.
7. Read the starred parts over to yourself.
8. Put the original article away.
9. Write the main idea in point form on your paper.
10. Write points for each important detail (look at the article if necessary).
11. Get a new piece of blank paper. Use your notes to write a paragraph that summarizes the article.
12. Read the original work again.
13. Reread your summary and add any key parts you missed.
14. Omit any parts in your summary that are not central to the main idea. Make sure you haven't introduced your own personal opinions.
15. Make a final copy of your summary. (Proofread it the next day.)

A Checklist

SUMMARIZING

- ☐ Did I read the original text carefully?
- ☐ Did I take notes as I read the second time?
- ☐ Did I note the title and author in my topic sentence?
- ☐ Did I identify the main idea of the text?
- ☐ Did I find three or more relevant details that relate to the main idea?
- ☐ Did I use attributive tags?
- ☐ Did I avoid introducing my own opinion?
- ☐ Did I omit details that were too specific (e.g., facts, stats)?
- ☐ Did I include a concluding statement?