

Summary Guidelines

(Adapted from Glen Rice, English Programs for Internationals, University of South Carolina)

What is a summary?

A summary restates the main ideas of an author (without most of the details) in your own words. It is generally about 1/4 of the length of the original.

Why are summaries important?

In college you often have to write library research papers. In these papers you gather information from many sources and include this information in your paper. A few direct quotes are allowed, but generally you are expected to summarize or paraphrase this information in your own words. (You also have to indicate the source.) Summary writing gives you practice in this rather difficult task. Most students also say that when they write summaries, their understanding of what they are reading improves. In addition, many students say that they feel their writing has improved as well. Finally, as students use new words they have learned in their summary, their vocabulary also improves.

How do I write a summary?

(Check off each step as you do it.)

1. Preview the article (read the title, sub-title, headings, first paragraph, first sentence of the following paragraphs, and the last paragraph). Get an overall idea of what this article is about. This is when you should use your dictionary. Look up unknown words that seem to be important from your preview.
2. Read the article. Underline (about 20%) as you read.
3. Go back over the article and make boxes over just the key words/phrases that you underlined. The boxes should remind you of the author's main idea. (Boxes should equal about 5% of the article.)
4. Make an informal outline of the article from your "boxes." Usually, but not always, you should include in your outline one main idea from every paragraph of the article. Emphasize the points the author emphasizes.
5. Begin to write your summary from your outline, without looking at the original article.
6. Your first sentence should approximately follow this model: "In his article 'March on Washington' (Newsweek, April 8, 1991) Osborn Elliot (discusses, states, argues, describes)..." MAKE SURE THAT YOUR FIRST SENTENCE GIVES THE THESIS (i.e. main thrust) OF THE ARTICLE.
7. At a later point in your summary remind us one more time that you are summarizing another person's work: e.g. "Mr. Elliot (or 'the author') also (states, believes, argues, etc.)..."
8. If you want to, you may directly quote the author once briefly. Use quotation marks.
9. Include a response at the end. Mark it "MY RESPONSE." Here and only here should you include your opinions.
10. Go back over your summary and check that you have not copied more than three consecutive words. (By all means, use new vocabulary from this article, but do not copy more than three words in a row.)
11. Now read your summary out loud and make sure that your meaning is clear to someone who has not read the article.
12. Now read your summary out loud a second time and look for grammar mistakes. Especially look for mistakes in 1) run-ons, 2) verb tenses, 3) articles, 4) spelling of easy words.
13. Type your summary and use spell-check.