



WRITING CENTER

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Summarizing a Text

Being able to effectively summarize a text is a skill that will serve you well in almost any course or career setting. Good summary skills have been shown to increase reading comprehension, shorten research time, improve information retention, and increase organizational skills.

Whatever your reasons for needing to summarize a text or improve your summary skills, the following process is one that can work well for you in almost any setting.

What makes a good summary?

First, there are several conventions that all good summaries share. You'll want to keep them in mind as you work with a text:

- A summary is significantly shorter than the source text: this may seem obvious, but make sure it's true!
- A summary gives a cohesive overview of the entire source: don't cherry-pick ideas to include or forget to summarize the source's conclusion
- A summary is organized logically: the easiest way to organize is to follow the source text's organization. Don't summarize their introduction and third paragraph, and then come back to something in the second paragraph.
- A summary is fully in your own words: no quotes!
- A summary reflects the genre of the source text: if you're summarizing a narrative piece like a short story, you're likely not going to say that "the author *argues* that..." You would use a word like "*describes*" or "*tells*."

Writing a Summary

1. Start by reading the text carefully. Studies show that our reading comprehension significantly increases when we are reading a hard copy of something, so if you can, get the paper book or print the article rather than using online versions. Read with a pen or highlighter in your hand and mark up the text as you read.
2. When you are finished, on a separate sheet of paper write down everything that you can remember from the text. What was the main point? What genre of writing was it? What were some examples or evidence the author used? Just brainstorm as quickly as you can; no need to think too long or hard at this point.
3. Once you've made a list from memory, look back over the text and see if there is anything crucial you missed. Add it to your list.
4. Look at your list and see if you can begin grouping items together. Perhaps this example goes with *that* supporting point, which goes with *that* piece of evidence from another source. The idea is to make 3-5 groups, organizing all the items on your list into one group or another. These groups are now the main points of your summary.
5. Decide on an order for your groups/main points, and begin to draft your summary (remember that the order you decide on should reflect the structure of the original text)

itself). The first sentence of the summary should include the name of the text, the author, and the main idea: “In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville tells the story of one man’s obsession with a whale and the consequences he faces because of it.” The following sentences will reflect your groups and the items you included in each one.

6. Work in chunks. When you’re drafting the summary, thinking about it group by group can help keep you from becoming overwhelmed, especially when working with longer texts.

Still need help summarizing a text?

Make an appointment with the Writing Center!

Library, Room 311/312

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