

Writing a Summary

A summary is a compressed version of a text in which you explain the author's meaning *in your words*. You summarize a text when you need to give your readers the gist of what it says. A summary should present the author's text accurately and represent his or her views fairly. You build your summary on the observations, connections and inferences you make while reading. Although there is no rule for how long or short a summary should be, a summary of a text is always *much* shorter than the text itself.

Writing a summary requires careful reading, in part to ensure that you thoroughly understand what you are reading. Writing a summary helps you respond to what you read by requiring careful analysis and consideration of its details.

Writing a summary requires essentially two kinds of skills: identifying the main idea(s) of the text you are summarizing, and recognizing the evidence that supports that idea(s). One strategy for writing a summary is to find the key points that support the main idea. You can do this by looking for clusters of sentences or groups of paragraphs that convey the writer's meaning. Because paragraphs work together, you cannot simply summarize each paragraph independently. You may need to summarize a cluster of paragraphs to convey the idea of a text effectively. It all depends on the length and complexity of the text you are summarizing and on how it is organized.

(from Robert DiYanni's Fifty Great Essays)

Some tips:

- Assume I have not read the text: in the beginning of your summary, mention the title of the piece, who the author is, when the piece was originally published, the setting or context of the story or events, what kind of writing it is (e.g. a story, a poem, a chapter from a textbook, etc.): give us the full context for the piece so that we know exactly what you're writing about
- Limit yourself to presenting only *the key points* of the piece: a summary is not a restating of every point and every illustration but rather a distillation of only the most important features
- In the second or third sentence of the summary, write an "about statement": a single sentence in which you attempt to distill the essence of the selection and tell us what it is essentially "about"—what the author's thesis is, or central theme or argument
- Maintain a neutral, objective and academic tone: move through the piece systematically, relating main points, etc. as they occur in the text, explaining them and then moving on
- Be concise: make every word count, and always write in the 3rd person, present tense
- Keep your focus on the text: Don't state the author's ideas as if they were your own
- Don't evaluate the author or the piece, or give us your subjective opinion of them: remember, you're not doing an analysis, just a summary of the key points as written
- Put the summary in your own words: only quote directly (and then only briefly) when you need to show us a specific, important term or phrase that's pivotal to our overall understanding of the piece