

# Summary Writing



**WARNING:** Good summaries are harder to write than you may think -- bad summaries are easy!

## Summary skills in college

The ability to write an effective summary might be the most important writing skill a college student can possess. You need to be able to summarize before you can be successful at most of the other kinds of writing that will be demanded of you in college, and it is an important part of note taking, too. The links below will help you master the various kinds of summary writing that you may be called upon to complete in college.

## Summary skills in daily life

To answer questions such as “what was the movie about?” “how did the game go?” and “what did I miss in class today?” you must be able to summarize. Your questioner doesn't want to know every line and action in the movie, every play in the game, or every word from class; the question asks you to select the important details and summarize them. Similarly, when you summarize a reading you need to be able to find the important data and then present it as clearly and concisely as possible.

## Summary skills after college

Politicians and corporations employ people to read every newspaper and newsmagazine and summarize relevant stories and articles. The more concise the summary the better, yet if any major details are omitted the purpose of the summary is lost--its readers will be uninformed on key aspects of the news and may make embarrassing errors as a result. The summaries that you write in college are as important to your academic career as these summaries are to these politicians and business people, and accuracy and concision are just as important, too.

## The key features of a summary

- (1) it is shorter than the source,
- (2) it repeats the ideas of the source in different phrases and sentences.

## The Reader's Summary

Obviously, you cannot write a good summary of a source that you do not understand. There are reading strategies that will help you comprehend a source text as fully as possible. One of those techniques is the **reader's summary**, which you write for yourself, as a way of understanding the text you are reading. Read a section of the book or article, or the whole thing if it is short, and then close the text and write a summary of the key points. When you've finished, skim the text again to make sure you didn't omit anything. This use of summary helps you learn *and* helps you check what you've learned.

## Summary-Outline Notes

Summary-outline notes are a form of note-taking using a divided page. Take a notebook page and divide it down the middle. Write the main points in the left hand column leaving a few lines between each. In the right hand column, summarize the point in the left column in a few sentences. This will help you get an overall sense of the argument through the outline, and a more detailed reminder of the content via the summaries.

## Summaries as part of essays

Most summary occurs as part of other essays--indeed, few essays use only one kind of writing. Summary is often a part of **synthesis** because readers need to know a little about the ideas you are pulling together. Similarly, you have to summarize ideas or texts before you can **compare** them, **classify** them, or divide them into their component parts. You will find that almost any texts you read in college and outside contain at least a little summary.

## The Summary essay

In college you may also be asked to write another type of summary, the summary essay, which is written for an audience other than yourself. The purpose of the summary essay is to convey to others an understanding of a text you have read, without their having to read it themselves. Thus for your readers, your summary essay functions as a substitute for the source that you are summarizing. You don't want to misrepresent your source or mislead your audience. Certainly an important feature of the summary essay, then, is its fidelity to the source; you must represent your source accurately and comprehensively, with as little of your own interpretation as possible. (Anytime you read and repeat a source, of course, you are interpreting it; but the summary essay asks you to minimize your interpretation as much as possible. You should not add your own examples and explanations, for instance.)

An alternative purpose of the summary essay, one that is very commonplace in college, is a demonstration of comprehension: teachers sometimes assign summary essays when they want to make sure that students fully understand an assigned source. In this case, your essay does not substitute for the source, for the teacher has read the source, too. Yet your essay will be written in the same way, with fidelity to the source.

## Writing the Summary Essay

A summary essay should be organized so that others can understand the source or evaluate your comprehension of it. The following format works well:

### a. The introduction (usually one paragraph)--

1. 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.
2. Also introduces the text to be summarized:
  - (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 (one or more paragraphs):**

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

1. Include important data but omit minor points;
2. Include one or more of the author's examples or illustrations (these will bring your summary to life);
3. 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.

## Checking your own writing or that of your peers

*Read the summary carefully and answer the following questions:*

- What do you like best about your peer's summary? (Why? How might he or she do more of it?)
- Is it clear what is being summarized? (i.e.: Did your peer list the source, and cite it correctly?)
- Is the thesis of the original essay clear in the summary? (Write out what you think that thesis is.)
- If you have read the original source, did you identify the same thesis? (If not, how does it differ?)
- Did your peer miss any key points from his or her summary? (If so, what are they?)
- Did your peer include any of his own opinions in his or her summary? (If so, what are they?)
- Did your peer include any unimportant details in his or her summary? (If so, what are they?)
- Where there any points in the summary where you were lost because a transition was missing? (If so, where and how might it be fixed?)
- Where there any points where you were lost because some information seems to have been omitted? (If so, where, and what seems to be missing? Why do you think it might be important?)