

Introduction to Summary Writing

In writing a summary, you are re-presenting the information that you have read in a compact manner. Summaries are incredibly useful to know how to write, not only in terms of keeping track of information for yourself and in your studies, but (often more importantly) in terms of communicating information concisely and adequately to other people.

Summaries are all around us and are used frequently in our daily conversations. If I were to ask you, “what was your day like yesterday,” you would, in fact, respond by giving me a summary of your day. And, interestingly, you probably would not begin your summary by telling me when you woke up in the morning. In other words, a summary does not usually begin with what the author first writes in a chapter. Rather, it will first describe the overall gist of the chapter, book, or article, followed by a review of the major points or events in the chapter. While summaries are sometimes chronological and focused on the events that occurred in a chapter or article, i.e., “Royte did this and then Royte did that,” summaries most often combine a discussion of the key points made in a chapter or article with a discussion of what happened.

Here are a few useful things to keep in mind when writing summaries:

- Make sure you understand the organization of the essay or chapter clearly
- Identify the thesis statement of the essay, topic sentences, and key points as you read
- Ask yourself, “What is this essay about?”
- Reconstruct the argument as presented by the author as a list

Thinking Rhetorically About Summaries

Although, rhetorically, the purpose and audience of summaries are both fairly obvious, i.e., the audience is anyone who doesn’t have time to read the whole article/book/essay and the purpose is to concisely re-present the contents of an article/book/essay, the status/function of the writer is somewhat unique. In writing a summary, you are not writing as yourself or about your opinions of a given piece of writing. Instead, you are writing objectively about another writer’s words. For some, it is not all that difficult to write objective descriptions of what a text is about. Others, however, may find this somewhat hard to do, in which case, you might want to think of writing a summary this way: Pretend that you yourself have written the article/book/essay and are now writing a description of what you have written.

Thinking Structurally About Summaries

Though summaries, like EVERY piece of writing, have an introduction, body, and conclusion, these sections are highly compacted, particularly in a short summary. Probably the oddest thing about a one paragraph summary is that the first sentence is both the introduction AND thesis statement for the summary. The sentences that follow each explain one of the key points of the article/book/essay. Finally—and this is possibly the MOST UNIQUE aspect of a summary—the THESIS statement of your summary is a concise restatement of the THESIS from the text you are writing the summary about.

Here is an example. It is a brief summary of Seth Mydans "Texting Shorthand Annoys Purists and May Have Lasting Impact." You will find a copy of the Op-Ed article, which was originally published in The New York Times, in your Course Documents Folder.

"Texting Shorthand Annoys Purists and May Have Lasting Impact" by Seth Mydans is about how texting is an effective agent for language change. Texting has produced its own acronyms, homonyms and abbreviations at a very rapid rate. The vocabulary of text messaging sounds the way they are spelled. Instead of through, it would be thru. Text messaging is having such an impact that some of its spellings are leaking into broader use. The Scottish Qualification Authority, which sets standards for the testing of students, said phrases like 2B R NT 2B and I LUV U would be acceptable on exams. Denis Pyatt, principal of a High School, who is a linguist, says that texting is another example of how language grows and it cannot be stopped. He also added, "Given the global village we are now part of, the immediacy of all communications now and how quick it all is, I can't see how this would not influence the future of the language."

Adapted from *What Is Writing?: An Introduction to Writing as an Act and Medium of Communication* (2015).



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