



Three Types of Summary: A Guide to Writing Summary

Students often have not had much practice in writing summaries. Further, the expectations of a “good” summary differ across the curriculum. What follows are three types of summaries with tips for writing them. If your discipline requires something different, edit and share with your students so they know how to proceed. If you can provide a model summary, that will help them as well.

The goal of summarizing material is to pass along the ideas belonging to another. You want, of course, to do this with fewer words than the original to save your reader the work of going to that document. You also want to maintain the integrity of the original document: not distorting the original views, ideas, attitudes, or their importance in the original.

Restatement or Précis

A précis is a shortening, in your own words, of a text of written work. You are to describe as accurately and briefly as possible the substance or main ideas contained in a text.

- Here the writing summarizing the piece of writing takes the point-of-view of the original writer (i.e., not "In the 'Declaration of Independence,' Jefferson maintains . . . "; but "An essential connection exists between how we are governed and . . .").
- Should be quite short: six to eight sentences at the longest, regardless of the original's length.
- Gives the main assertion (controlling idea) of the original.
- No concrete examples or details (quotes or paraphrases from the original) used here.

One of the first (if not the first) difficulties to overcome in writing a précis is getting the facts straight. You should make no statements unsupported by the text. Make sure that all you say about the text is factually correct.

Another difficulty is putting the material into your own words. To do so, read the work carefully at least three times, put the work aside, and then begin writing. This will force you to use your own words without the temptation of borrowing directly from the original.

Selecting the most effective details is also a difficulty. Work to pick out those details that are of greatest significance. Some details are more important than others, and you must choose details according to the scale of importance.

Do not make any conclusions about the original, its audience, or anything relating to the text. Your job is to provide your reader an accurate, but brief, map of the original and what you think about the writing or the topic of the text is not relevant here.

Descriptive Summary

- Should give all the information contained in the restatement, but it must go beyond it.
- The article being summarized becomes an object that you observe and then convey to the reader. Again, you are providing your reader a map of the original, but with a bit more detail than the précis.
- Descriptive summary should give your reader an effective and accurate map of the original. It should be proportional to the author's intentions.
- Descriptive Summary should let the reader know what kind of evidence the original presents and how this evidence is organized. This explanatory material, still in your own words, may be inserted between the sentences of the précis, describing the material used by the writer to make the point discussed by the précis.
- Still no concrete examples or paraphrases from the essay within the summary.

Analytical Summary

- With the analytical summary, the writer takes a more active role than in the other types of summary.
- Should give all the information contained in a descriptive summary, but must go beyond it. This summary requires the thematic structure of a central idea, a thesis statement, and support of this thesis using the material of the original. This summary will be an essay discussing the original.
- Analytical Summary should give a clear indication of the audience and purpose of the document being analytically summarized.
- One or two quotations from the document being analytically summarized can be appropriate here.
- A judgment should be made concerning the document being analytically summarized. Study your notes (composed by making use of the reading hints below) and determine how those details fit into a pattern that you can describe as a central idea (not 'THE' central idea, but 'A' central idea).
- The writer might speculate on the implications (to the audience of your choosing) of the document being analytically summarized.
- Should give the reader a clear indication of how useful the original would be to one interested in the subject with which the original deals.
- The analytical summary must still provide the reader of the summary with a clear and effective understanding of the message contained in the original.

Reading Hints

- Underline, highlight, or circle key sentences, phrases, and words.
- Read each paragraph as a unit of thought.
- Use a dictionary for words that seem important or those that you do not understand.
- As you discover them, summarize main points in a few words.
- Decide if the content is based on opinion, evidence, and/or logic and why that can be important.



- Think about the subject-audience-context-purpose relationship.
- Look for evidence, logical analysis, and reasoning.
- Think about your biases for and against the ideas presented.
- Evaluate your reactions to the material.
- Annotate: Make notes in the margins as you respond to the above questions and the essay.
- Record reactions, questions, and understandings of the reading.
- Organize text for reviewing, studying, or writing about.
- Isolate key terms and phrases.
- Write notes on key words, phrases, or sentences. These writings can comment, question, evaluate, define, relate, challenge

Organizing Your Analytical Summary

Introduction

The introduction should contain the name of the work being summarized, the author, and the general situation surrounding the text. The introduction is the best place to include the thesis around which the remainder of the analytical summary will be built.

Body

The body should build on and directly support the thesis. Present the main ideas as they occur in the essay and demonstrate how that material supports the contention of the thesis. Follow closely the work you are summarizing and use an occasional word, phrase, or passage from the original to give your reader a taste of the original.

Conclusion

The conclusion should look back to both the body of your essay and the introduction, possibly explaining how your interpretation/analysis of the original is important in a broader context. This broader context needs a direct relationship to the summary's thesis.