

5.

HOW AND WHY TO SUMMARIZE

Learning Objectives

- Explain the qualities of a good summary
- Define paraphrasing and summarizing
- Recognize accidental plagiarism
- Determine when to quote a passage

What is a Summary?

A summary is a comprehensive and objective restatement of the main ideas of a text (an article, book, movie, event, etc.), in paragraph form. You don't follow the five-paragraph essay structure to write summaries; rather, the summary should present the author's thesis statement first and should follow the same organizational structure as the text you're summarizing. The distinguishing features of a summary are

- Summaries are significantly shorter
- Summaries are objective—no opinions
- Summaries are organized in the same way the original text is organized

Summaries Are Shorter

Summaries are much shorter than the original material. A general rule is that they should be no more than 10% to 15% the length of the original, and because the texts you will be asked to summarize will vary in length, you will be responsible for determining how long the summary should be. The best way to determine whether your summary is short or long enough is to write a paragraph-by-paragraph summary of the main ideas (see **Chapter**

4, “**Critical Reading**”) before you write the formal summary. The paragraph-by-paragraph summary can serve as an outline for your formal summary, and you can check your formal summary against the paragraph-by-paragraph summary. Have you accurately conveyed the main points and only the main points in your own words? If your summary seems too long, ask whether you are providing any information that is too specific—for example, facts that supports an argument—and eliminate these passages. As long as you have conveyed all of the main ideas, your summary is probably long enough.

Being able to determine what is and what is not a main point is key to writing a successful summary. It might help to remember that support typically includes information such as statistics, examples, references to authorities or to studies conducted at universities, and comparisons. Your summaries, therefore, will typically not include statistics, examples, references to authorities or to studies, or comparisons. If you use the phrase “for example” in a summary, consider whether the information that follows is actually a main point.

Summaries are Objective

Summaries are objective, meaning you don’t include your own ideas or opinions in a summary: you say what the author says, no more. Being objective means avoiding language that is evaluative, such as good, bad, effective, ineffective, interesting, boring. Also, keep “I” out of the summary. First person plural (“we”) is sometimes okay, but only when if the text being summarized is referring to a general group of people to which all readers belong—e.g., Americans.

Remaining objective can be challenging, especially if we’re reading something controversial. We may agree or disagree strongly with what this author is saying, or we may want to compare their information with the information presented in another source, or we may want to share our own opinion on the topic. Often, our opinions slip into summaries even when we work diligently to keep them separate. These opinions are not the job of a summary, though. A summary should highlight *only* the main points of the article.

Organizing the summary

A summary of someone else’s text is not structured like the five-paragraph essays you may have written in other classes; instead, it may be only one paragraph, or it may be a couple of paragraphs, and instead of presenting your thesis, you present the writer’s thesis—the main point he or she is trying to make. Moreover, you don’t have to determine how best to organize a summary because you present the thesis or main idea in the first sentence of the summary, followed by each of the main points presented in the original text, in the same order. Your job with a summary is to follow the organization of the original text closely and to present each of the main ideas as succinctly as possible. If you complete the paragraph-by-paragraph summary correctly (see Chapter 4), you will have an outline of the information you need to present in the summary.

Determining whether you should present your summary in one, two, or three (and maybe, sometimes,

more) paragraphs can be more difficult, but keep in mind the purpose of a paragraph and use the original text as a guide to help you determine when you need a paragraph break. For example, if the original text is divided into sections, can you present each section in one paragraph? If the text is only a couple of pages, it's likely you can summarize it in one paragraph.

Using Your Own Words in a Summary

One of the main reasons professors ask students to summarize texts is because a good summary shows that students really understood what they read. When we can explain something in our own words, rather than repeat something we've memorized, we typically have a solid understanding of that something. In writing a formal summary, you may quote a few key passages, but most of the summary will be in your own voice; you will use your own sentence structures and words to convey the main points.

Putting someone else's ideas into our own words is called paraphrasing or summarizing, and it is difficult! When you paraphrase, you put another person's ideas into your own words, without leaving anything out. A paraphrase is like a quote, only it's in your own voice. Summaries, though, condense a passage significantly. You may put the gist of a paragraph into one or two sentences rather than attempting to put all of the ideas from the paragraph into your own words. To put it simply, a paraphrase is as long as the original text being paraphrased whereas a summary is much shorter. Both paraphrases and summaries are in your own voice.

Sometimes, when they're new to paraphrasing and summarizing an author's ideas, students accidentally plagiarize by using too many of the same words as the author uses or by following the author's sentence structure too closely. They may also plagiarize by failing to cite a passage that they've paraphrased or summarized. Whether writing an essay or a summary, students must be able to put complicated ideas into their own voice, and they need to have a good understanding of what needs to be cited, when, and how.

First, it's important to understand that the words "cite" and "quote" do NOT mean the same thing. Quoting is putting someone's exact words on the page, with quotation marks around those exact words. Citing is the method we use to give credit to the work we studied to formulate our opinions, whether we quote, paraphrase, or summarize from the work. *Putting quotation marks around a passage is not citing that passage.* All the quotation marks do is tell the reader you have presented the exact language from the source. A citation, on the other hand, gives credit to the ideas you borrowed from a source and put into your own words. In an essay, you are required to cite not just the words you use but also the ideas you learned from others, and you do that by using the documentation style your professor expects (MLA, in English and humanities classes). The biggest mistake many first-year students make is that they don't realize they have to cite paraphrases and summaries, too, not just quotations. To maintain academic integrity, students must cite all references to a text when writing essays. If a student cites only the quotations, it's likely he or she has likely committed plagiarism.

Summaries, on the other hand, require that you use your own words and sentence structures to present the main ideas of the text you're summarizing. Summaries, therefore, consist *only* of paraphrases, summaries,

and quotations, so every sentence in a summary is information from a source, the source being the text you're summarizing. If sentences from your summaries appeared in an essay, you would need to cite them; however, in a summary, you begin with a sentence that includes the author and title of the work you're summarizing. The first sentence serves as the signal or attributive phrase, and each sentence after that is a paraphrase, a summary, a quotation, or a combination of paraphrase, summary, and quote. While a few professors might require that you cite every sentence in a summary, most professors find this unnecessary because the first sentence works as the citation for the entire summary. Nothing following that first sentence interrupts the summary, so as long as the summary includes numerous references to the author(s) and uses signal phrases, in-text citations are not necessary.

Quotation marks, though, are necessary when including the exact words from the text you're summarizing, even when you use only a few of the words from a text. In summaries, accidental plagiarism occurs when students don't put quotation marks around the exact words of the original, or when they change the sentence structure from the original only slightly. Read this original passages below, followed by the plagiarized paraphrase.

Original: While each professor provides a breakdown of how your final grade for the course will be determined (see your syllabus), your responses to formal writing assignments will constitute the largest portion of your grade (70%-90%) in both Composition I and II. Typically, class activities, such as short writing exercises, quizzes, journals, informal responses to readings, and homework, will count for no more than 20% of your overall grade (*TCC Guidebook for Composition I and II* 8).

Plagiarized paraphrase: While individual professors provide a list of how your final grade for the course will be determined, something you can see in the syllabus, formal writing assignments constitute the greatest portion of your final grade in English 1113 and English 1213. Short writing exercises, quizzes, journals, informal responses to readings, and homework typically count for less than twenty percent of the overall grade (*TCC Guidebook for Composition I and II* 8).

The paraphrase would be considered plagiarism because it follows the original wording too closely, as indicated by the yellow highlighted information. A passage like this would be considered plagiarism if it appeared in either an essay or a summary. Even with the citation, the passage is plagiarized because the writer has failed to show the readers that some of the wording is verbatim from the original. Quotation marks tell your readers that you're borrowing information and presenting it in the exact same language that the author used. When you don't use quotation marks around the exact same language an author used, you're being deceptive. The reader will think the writing is yours when the words you wrote are really copied from another text.

In general, therefore, *if you use three or more words from the original in the same order, you probably need to put quotation marks around those words*. Even if you include an in-text citation after a paraphrase with three or more words in a row from the original, you could be guilty of plagiarism. If you rely on the original's sentence structure and merely tinker with it by replacing some words with synonyms, you're probably too close to the original. To paraphrase effectively, you need to present the original idea using significantly different sentence structures and synonyms. Here's an acceptable paraphrase of the passage above:

Acceptable paraphrase: The syllabus provides your professor’s grade distribution—how he or she will determine your final grade. Whatever the breakdown is, the greatest percentage of the final grade in both English 1113 and English 1213 will be based on the formal writing assignments you complete. Other activities, such as quizzes or journals or homework, won’t usually count for more than 20% of your final grade (*TCC Guidebook for Composition I and II* 8).

You should be able to see that the acceptable paraphrase is significantly different in structure from the original, but it conveys the same points. Using key words from the original—in this case, words like “grade” and “professor”—is fine, but you shouldn’t follow the original wording too closely unless you’re going to quote the passage, in which case, you should copy the passage exactly and use quotation marks. In an essay, you’ll also use an in-text citation, but you won’t need to cite a quotation in a summary.

When to Quote

When should you choose to quote instead of paraphrasing? For summaries as well as essays, you should quote when

- a passage is just too difficult to paraphrase or summarize without losing the meaning
- a direct quote would be more concise than an attempt to paraphrase
- the author has used particularly effective language that is too good to pass up—language that reveals the author’s attitude or is memorable and distinctive
- the author is a particular authority whose exact words would lend credence to your argument (for essays only)
- you need to analyze a passage (for essays only)
- you want to present a counterargument accurately to avoid the straw man fallacies (for essays)

Most of your summaries should consist of paraphrases and summaries, not quotations, but it’s usually a good idea to include at least one well-chosen passage, and you should weave it into your summary. Again, unless your professor says otherwise, you don’t need to in-text citations because all of the sentences in your summary are from the original text, and the opening sentence provides a signal phrase for the entire summary. Make sure, though, you don’t drop or dump the quoted passage into your summary. You can avoid a dumped quote by using signal phrases and by combining paraphrase and quotations.

Summaries Are for All Disciplines

By mastering the craft of summarizing, students put themselves in the position to do well on many assignments in college, not just those in English classes. In most fields (from the humanities to the soft and hard sciences)

summary is a required task. Being able to summarize lab results accurately and briefly, for example, is critical in a chemistry or engineering class. Summarizing the various theories of sociology or education helps a person apply them to his or her fieldwork. Even if a professor doesn't ask you to summarize anything, being able to summarize what you read in the course textbook or summarizing a professor's lecture will help you understand key concepts presented in any class. In college, therefore, it's imperative you learn how to summarize well not just because you will be asked to do it so often but also because summarizing will help you learn.

Key Takeaways

- Summarizing tests your understanding of a text.
- Putting someone's ideas into your own voice (paraphrasing and summarizing) is not easy.
- Quoting and citing are not the same thing.
- Knowing what to cite is crucial to your college success.