

Title of Module: Summarizing

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Video 1: Summarizing Academic Texts

Summarizing in Different Contexts

In everyday life, you may find yourself summarizing in different situations or contexts --for example, you may describe a movie or a book. Throughout your academic life, you will find that summarizing is a vital skill:

- you may summarize the content of a difficult text you are assigned for a class in order to demonstrate understanding.
- you may need to summarize texts to articulate the authors' main ideas and key points as a basis for discussion.
- Or you may be writing a research paper, for which you would need to condense lengthy sources into a concise form to convey the source's essential meaning, and acknowledge and respond to those sources.

In this learning module, we will review some of the basic steps of summarizing for the purposes of academic writing.

Initial Steps of Summarizing: Where and How to Begin

Before you can begin to summarize a text, you must read the passage carefully and understand the significance of each idea and how it is linked to other ideas. In other words, in order to write an accurate summary, you need to fully digest the content. Identifying key concepts, vocabulary, and phrases is helpful in understanding the main ideas.

Identification of the Main Points and Key Concepts

The first step in summarizing a passage is to identify the main points of the text. Now, how do you judge which points are important? Some texts, like newspaper articles may not have clear structures, or well-developed paragraphs with clear topic sentences, so identifying the main idea becomes rather challenging. Sometimes, you may need to summarize a longer reading containing a number of complex and abstract ideas, or a reading that may also be disorganized and therefore, difficult to understand and condense. In order to write a good summary, you need to read between the lines, while mining the logic and intentions of the writer. Sometimes, you may need to read the article more than once in order to identify the main idea. In such cases, find key concepts that signal the main idea, and take marginal notes, or annotate carefully. Once you have read between the lines, and identified the key concepts of the text, you can begin writing your summary.

It is also important to note that a summary is not necessarily a compilation of all the author's points in the ***order*** that the author presents them. You are not expected to include every repetition and detail you come across in the text, rather, you extract only those points that seem important, and write the summary in your own words.

Video 2: Examples of Identifying Main Ideas and Key Concepts of a Passage for the Purpose of Summarizing

Let's review a couple of examples on how you could ***annotate and identify the main ideas and key concepts of a passage or article***:

Example 1:

It is often remarked that science has increasingly removed man from a position at the center of the universe. Once upon a time the earth was thought to be the center and the gods were thought to be in close touch with the daily actions of humans. It was not stupid to imagine the earth was at the center, because, one might think, if the earth were moving around the sun, and if you threw a ball vertically upward, it would seem the ball should come down a few feet away from you. Nevertheless, slowly, over many centuries, through the work of Copernicus, Galileo, and many others, we have mostly come to believe that we live on a typical planet orbiting a typical star in a typical galaxy, and indeed that no place in the universe is special.

Gordon Kane, from "Are We the Center of the Universe?"

In this paragraph the main idea of the text is presented in the first and last sentences. The first sentence is acting as the topic sentence by providing a broader generalization. The sentence is focusing on the impacts of science on mankind. In the second part of the last sentence, the author is making connections between the evidence presented in the paragraph and the main idea in the topic sentence and wrapping up the paragraph, so it has a more general focus. This is a good sentence that captures the gist of the paragraph. Throughout your passage, you would want to find a strong sentence or sentences that suggest the main ideas and key points of the text, and annotate them. Identifying these passages will assist you in understanding the main idea of the passage, and writing a summary based on those main ideas.

Let's take a look at another example:

Here is a paragraph in which no sentence is broad enough to sum up the main idea, but which contains useful phrases:

Peace is not the same as quiet. Peace means you **avoid checking your e-mail** every 10 seconds. Peace means you are **willing to work offline**, **screen calls**, and **forget your to-do list** for an hour. If this is difficult, **turn off your Web browser**, or try writing **without a computer** altogether.

Allegra Goodman, from
So, You want to be a writer? Here's how.

Your first instinct in summarizing the above passage may be to list the key phrases we've highlighted. For example, you may write: *"When writing, Allegra Goodman, the author of "So, You Want to be a Writer? Here's How", recommends that you avoid checking your emails every 10 seconds, work offline, screen calls, forget your to-do list, and turn off your web browser".* However, this kind of summarizing resembles a patchwork, and the words and phrases are pulled out directly from the original. Even if you acknowledged the borrowings, by using quotation marks, as we just did, you would still have a weak sentence that is neither yours nor the author's. Constructing entirely new sentences based on your understanding of the text is far more effective.

For example, you may write something like: *"Allegra Goodman, in her essay, "So, You Want to be a Writer? Here's How", emphasizes the importance of working in a comfortable environment, and avoiding access to modern technology, which may interrupt the writer's thoughts".*

Video 3: Summarizing Guidelines

General guidelines for writing a summary

Keep in mind that ***The summary must be comprehensive***. You should review all your notes and include in your summary all those ideas that are essential to the author's development of the essay.

The summary must be concise. Eliminate repetitions in your list, even if the author restates the same points. Your summary should be considerably shorter than the source. A general rule of thumb for summarizing a text as an assignment is to aim for 1/3-1/5 of the article's original length. Make sure you are also following your instructor's specific instructions regarding the length of your summary.

The summary must be coherent. It should not be taken directly from your list of notes and sound like a list of sentences that happen to be strung together in a paragraph format.

The summary must be objective. When writing a basic summary, you are supposed to act as the reporter of the text, and use your own words, rather than those of the original text. You would want to maintain your own voice throughout the summary, but keep in mind that you would also need to remain faithful to the content, meaning that you cannot change the information, add new information or subtract major ideas.

Also, keep in mind that **the summary must refer to the author in third person.** Make it clear to your reader when you are directly summarizing from the text, and when you are inferring from or explaining what is being summarized. Always introduce the text with the author's name and title of the work. Whenever you refer to the original, make sure you quote and cite it properly (MLA, APA, Chicago style, etc.).

Pay attention to the way you order the information in your summary. Summaries can follow the chronology of the text, which would be the simplest form or reorder the ideas depending on the understanding of the underlying priorities of the text, which would be a more sophisticated approach. Typically, if the original text is written in a linear fashion with a straightforward structure, you may be able to write your summary in the order the author has presented the information; however, you shouldn't always assume that's the case.

Grammar Point: Verb Tense in Summaries

You may have noticed in our previous examples that most **verbs are in the simple present tense.** This is something you would want to pay attention to when you are writing a summary of a text. The most common tense in writing a summary is the *present simple* tense. Works of writing, or even paintings and films are considered eternally present. Therefore, when you write about writers or artists as they express themselves, use the present tense; however, keep in mind that sometimes, a sentence may use both the past and present tenses. For example, in this sentence:

“The first part of the poem, which she *completed* in 1804, *describes* the effects of isolation from society”, you see a verb tense shift, but the shift is a logical one: The completion of the poem happened in the past, but the poem, as it is now, describes the effects of isolation from society.

The simple past tense is often used as an alternative to the present when summarizing plot in fictional works. In most other cases of academic writing, the typical academic tense is the simple present.

Keep in mind that consistency is very important in writing clearly. Sometimes, shifting verb tenses could be very confusing for the reader, so make sure you have a logical reason for shifting tenses. Verb tense may also vary in different genres, so you should study the conventions in each of those cases.

Summarizing vs. Analysis

Often times, students confuse summarizing and analyzing, and it is important to note that they are not the same. In analysis, you read the text critically and dissect the author's main ideas, support for those ideas, special writing strategies, or rhetorical techniques. When writing a basic summary, you should add nothing new to the material in the source, nor should you change the emphasis or provide any new interpretation or evaluation.

In a basic summary your job is to describe what the author says without taking a position and judging it, as you may in an interpretive summary. For example, your reader should know that in Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue" essay, the author classifies her family's different "Englishes" into their various kinds, but not whether you think the author should have made the classification the way she did. Keep in mind, the point of a typical academic summary is to provide the background information or in other words, the common ground.

Remember that you will use your summarizing skills when you are analyzing a text since you would need to briefly summarize the contents of the original text for your reader first in order to present the ideas you will be analyzing, but keep in mind that an analysis would never *replace* a summary; in fact, it builds on the summary. How to write analytical summaries will be discussed at length in a separate module.

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