

Summary Writing

Table of Contents

<i>Summary Basics</i>	2
Definition	2
Other words for summaries	2
Why do people write and read summaries?	2
<i>Conventions of Summary Writing</i>	3
<i>Connecting & Linking Ideas</i>	4
Paragraph without transitions	4
Paragraph with transitions	4
More on Connecting & Linking	4
<i>Attributive Tags</i>	5
Attributive Tag Guidelines	5
More on attributive tags	6
<i>Avoiding Bias</i>	6
Avoid overt judgment & praise	6
<i>Verb Tenses</i>	7
Why use simple present tense?	7
Avoid present progressive	7
<i>Other Considerations</i>	8
<i>More Thoughts on Summary Writing</i>	8

Summary Writing

In this lesson, you will learn the conventions of summary writing. It is one of the most basic yet essential forms of writing because it often serves as a “backbone” of other writing modes, such as research papers, literary analysis, argument, persuasion, and rhetorical analysis. When summaries are not bolstering different modes, they offer us an “at a glance” view—sometimes called a synopsis—of a longer form (a novel, article, essay, book, movie, conference, speech, etc.) Though summaries are basic, they’re crucial. Readers of summaries appreciate them when they are clear, eloquent, and thorough.

Though you could be writing a summary of many different source types, our context will be an article or essay.

Summary Basics

Definition

A summary is a shorter version—or a brief overview—of a longer form (often text, but can be a movie, play, conference, interview, event, etc.) A summary includes the main argument, theme, point, sub-claims, and details.

Other words for summaries

You may hear other words for summaries, like a *synopsis*, often associated with a book, play, or movie. *Abstract* or *precis* are words often used to describe a re-cap of an academic paper or formal writing.

Why do people write and read summaries?

They take the place of reading very long texts, for which we don't always have time or inclination. Here are other good reasons why we write summaries:

- To make your critique clear. Often you are critiquing or analyzing a text your audience hasn't read. You must summarize its points so your audience will understand your critique.
- To show a person you "get" them. Demonstrate understanding. Writing is a sub-action for the ultimate goal of effective communication. People feel respected when you clearly understand what they said just as they meant it.
- To inform others about a topic or idea. For instance, if you attended a good lecture, conference, or speech and want to share its ideas with others, writing a summary would meet that goal.
- Give people the short version. Provide others an understanding of a longer text if they cannot read it or cannot read it in its entirety.
- To focus on main points. Writing a summary forces you to consider a piece's key ideas. We rarely have this type of clarity without intentionality.

- To comprehend better. We better understand and remember the content of a text or other form when we write out its ideas.
- To study more efficiently – When you read a book chapter and later have to review it to study for a test, it's more time-efficient to read a summary you wrote shortly after reading than to read the whole chapter again.

Conventions of Summary Writing

Let's talk about some of the conventions of summary writing. "Conventions" is another word for "guidelines." The guidelines are not in place to be restrictive but to encourage presenting information thoroughly and in line with academic norms.

- Start the summary by giving complete information about the original source. When was it published? Where was it published? Who wrote it?
- Be sure to put the full article title in quotes. Use the writer's full name when introducing the article.
- In the next sentence, provide the article's main argument. This should not be too general. It should be specific and nuanced.
- You have the option, if you prefer, to convey the main argument in the same sentence as the article information.
- Provide context if you have it and think it is relevant – audience, purpose, and situation of the piece.
- Follow up with important sub-points from the article. Focus more on claims and sub-claims than on elaborate details and examples, though you can selectively include one or two especially relevant ones.
- Give even coverage of the article. Include content from the beginning, middle, and end, weaving through the writer's ideas in a way that retains the logical flow of the argument as ideas build on each other.
- Use your own words when writing a summary. Direct quoting everything can be tempting, but you should avoid doing so. Instead, use your own words in 95% of what you are writing. Save a direct quote for an especially compelling phrase or statement that is best expressed as in the original source.

Connecting & Linking Ideas

You should retain the original text's connection between ideas. Use transition words and phrases to show relationships and how ideas build on each other. Do not just list statements from the text.

Examples of transition words and phrases are: however, in addition, therefore, nonetheless, although. Transition words are usually of a type related to time, contrast, addition, consequence, emphasis, etc. You will be provided with full lists to help guide your writing.

Paragraph without transitions

Medical science has succeeded in identifying the hundreds of viruses that can cause the common cold. It has discovered the most effective means of prevention. One person transmits the cold viruses to another most often by hand. An infected person covers his mouth to cough. He picks up the telephone. His daughter picks up the telephone. She rubs her eyes. She has a cold. It spreads. To avoid colds, people should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces.

Paragraph with transitions

Medical science has **thus** succeeded in identifying the hundreds of viruses that can cause the common cold. It has **also** discovered the most effective means of prevention. One person transmits the cold viruses to another most often by hand. **For instance**, an infected person covers his mouth to cough. **Then**, he picks up the telephone. **Half an hour later**, his daughter picks up the **same** telephone. **Immediately afterward**, she rubs her eyes. **Within a few days**, she, **too**, has a cold. **And thus** it spreads. To avoid colds, **therefore**, people should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces.

Notice how much easier to understand the second paragraph is.

More on Connecting & Linking

However, it's important to note that linking ideas well when summarizing does not mean haphazardly throwing in transition words and phrases. You also shouldn't overuse them. As your reading and writing improve, you'll get a sense of what is too much and what is not.

You must use transitions in a context-appropriate way. This means having a good understanding of the relationship between ideas.

When extrapolating from a text, ask yourself: is one thought an explanation for a previous thought? Is it an example of something? Does it emphasize or reinforce a point already made? Is it refuting the previous thought or agreeing with it? Is it showing a consequence or result?

When you have a good handle on connections, you won't have to consciously think about using transition words; they and other ways of associating ideas will come to you naturally based on your understanding of how points relate.

Developing these understandings is best done at the text comprehension stage before you begin writing. At this point, you not only read your source but re-read it several times, if necessary, and take notes, summarizing sections (in one sentence or long phrase) as you go. Consider even having a discussion about the text with someone else to clarify points, meaning, and connections.

Attributive Tags

Now let's talk about attributive tags. The word "attribute" means to give credit. For instance, you might say..."I attribute my success to my parents." You give your parents credit for your success. When writing a summary of someone else's article, you must give the writer credit for their ideas. This is the case even if you agree with their points or have had the same thoughts previously. For the purpose of the summary, the ideas are the writer's. Attributive tags are phrases such as "they argue," "Patel points out," "Hughes contends..."

Attributive Tag Guidelines

- Use the writer's full name the first time you mention them, but their last name only thereafter. For instance, initially, you'd refer to a writer as Candace Maldonado, but refer to her as simply Maldonado in subsequent references.
- Avoid referring to the writer as "Mr." "Mrs." or "Miss."
- You do not have to use an attributive tag in every sentence, but you should use them often enough that the reader of your summary never loses sight that you're conveying someone else's ideas.
- Use a variety of verbs in attributive tags and make sure they fit the context. These are commonly used verbs: says, argues, believes, feels strongly that, reminds us....
- You can use pronouns in your attributive tags – "he says" "she says" "the writer believes that..."

More on attributive tags

Mix it up. You don't always have to use a standard "name plus verb" construction, such as "Johnson says" or "Johnson believes." Try other ways to give the writer credit. "According to Johnson, people have always..." "Per Johnson, people have always..." "Johnson's take on the issue is..."

Ideas within ideas. Some students get confused about how to frame ideas when the writer they're summarizing is also quoting or referencing someone else. Here's how to handle that. After you've made clear that the main writer invokes an expert or someone else, you can use that person's name as well. For instance, "Parkinson says psychologist Walt Lee's theories are valid. Lee believes that..."

It bears repeating: you DON'T have to include an attributive tag in every sentence of your summary. They should show up quite frequently, but it's okay if you skip a sentence or two here and there.

Avoiding Bias

A very important aspect of summary writing is neutrality. Avoiding bias. Even though you likely have many thoughts and opinions on the article you have read, if you're only asked to write a summary of it, you should adopt a neutral tone.

Do not express your opinion—no agreement, disagreement, or anything in between.

Your role is the unbiased messenger, relaying ideas from the writer to the reader.

Attributive tags, therefore, should be neutral...Robertson argues...Robertson believes. Don't use words with negative connotations – rants, complains, goes on and on...

Avoid overt judgment & praise

"Robertson makes the ridiculous point that..."

"She doesn't know what she's talking about when she says..."

"McClendon makes the great point that..."

“Mandviwala makes the intelligent point that...”

If you have to err either way, you should err slightly more toward generosity toward the writer.

Verb Tenses

Now let’s talk about verb tenses. Do not write about the writer’s ideas in the past tense. Even though you may have read the article in the past, or the writer wrote the article in the past, you still write in the simple present tense.

He argues

He believes

She claims

She points out

Not ~~argued, believed, claimed, pointed out~~

Why use simple present tense?

The idea is that people’s beliefs typically *endure*. The article writer likely still holds the same beliefs, values, and opinions; they didn’t have them only at the time they wrote the article. Presenting the article’s ideas in the present tense also conveys that the article and its thoughts are still very much alive and relevant in the present.

This does not mean that your summary won’t have any past tense verbs at all. In some contexts of what you are saying, a past tense verb will be necessary. Example: “Onochi says that teachers taught their subjects five days a week...”

But in stating the writer’s thoughts and ideas...you should write in simple present...”He argues...” “She states...”

Avoid present progressive

“She is saying...”

“Carlson is pointing out”

“Onochi is arguing...”

It’s okay to use present progressive sparingly, but mostly you should write in the simple present tense.

“She says” “Onochi argues...” “Onochi contends...”

Other Considerations

- Do not give a play-by-play. Do not write what the author “does” but what he or she “says”
- Avoid saying “in the article” excessively. The reader only needs to be told in the beginning that you are discussing an article. It’s okay to say it once more in the body, but don’t go overboard.
- Adopt “wrap-up” words and tone as you conclude. Ideas to end the summary: “The writer concludes that...” “In short, Garrison believes...” “Ultimately, Ordonez feels...” “Parker leaves us with the thought that...”

More Thoughts on Summary Writing

- **Thesis Statement (Main Idea) in your source article.** The thesis statement in an article (that you read to write your summary) is not always at the beginning. It can be anywhere within the article, but in your summary, you should place their thesis at the beginning after you introduce the article information.
- **Summary Length** = a good rule of thumb is...no more than ¼ the length of the original article/text. So, if you read an article that’s 4 pages, your summary should be about 1 page. If you read an article that’s 8 pages, your summary should be no more than 2 pages. (This is just a generalization; it doesn’t account for when the article doesn’t have much line spacing, but your writing does, or vice versa. That can throw off the “no more than ¼ the original article” rule of thumb.)
- **Purpose Matters.** Summary length also depends on your purpose with the summary. Not everything is a quantified absolute. Many writing decisions, including length and level of detail, are about who the audience is and what they need. School assignments encourage thinking about the audience, but there’s a tendency to default to what the teacher wants or a generalization or formula for how long a summary should be. This is okay – just keep in mind that determination of summary length has to do, first & foremost, with the audience and its needs.

- **Don't Paraphrase.** Don't confuse summarizing with paraphrasing. The latter (paraphrasing) means taking an original text line by line and putting everything in your own words. Your paraphrase of an entire article may end up the same length, or close to the same length, as the original article. By contrast, a summary is intentionally a shorter version of the original text and does not intend to include content from each line of the original text. It extracts what is most important.