

WRITING A SUMMARY

A summary is a shortened or condensed version, in your own words, of something you have read. Not only an important writing skill, summary writing is also a valuable learning tool. The most common kind of summary writing in college requires you to read the work of someone else, to be able to pick out the most essential idea, and to put these ideas into your own words. The summary, therefore, becomes a tool for understanding what you read; it forces you to read critically, differentiating between main ideas and minor points. Summary writing also forces you to write clearly because you cannot waste any words.

The first aim of the summary is *brevity*: your job as a summary writer is to convey in as few words as possible the information contained in the piece of writing. Because the summary is concerned with stating the ideas of someone else, the second aim of the summary is *objectivity*. This is not the place to respond to a writer's ideas but to demonstrate your understanding of them. The third aim of the summary, *completeness*, is the most crucial. Both objectivity and brevity will follow from your ability to isolate and concentrate on the main idea contained in the selection you are summarizing.

Method for Writing a One-Paragraph Summary

1. Read the passage carefully and answer the following questions:
 - A. What is the topic of the passage?
 - B. What is the author's purpose in writing? Does the author describe something, analyze a problem, give information, review a book or movie, try to persuade the reader to adopt his point of view or take some action, state a personal opinion or grievance, give instructions for completing a task, or compare different products or viewpoints?
2. What point is the author trying to make? Which are major ideas used to develop this point and which are minor supporting ideas and examples? Underline the major ideas.
3. Now reread. Go back and break up the piece of writing into sections or stages of thought, labeling each section. The author's use of paragraphing may be helpful in identifying the different stages of thought.
4. On a separate sheet of paper, write a one-sentence restatement in your own words of the main idea of the passage. Include in this sentence the title and author of the piece you are summarizing.
5. Next, give a one-sentence summary of each of the stages of thought you identified and combine these sentences with the one-sentence restatement of the main idea.
6. Read over what you have written to make sure you have eliminated less important information and left out minor details. Use as few words as possible to convey the major ideas.
7. Read over your summary and revise it. First, be sure you have followed the organizational pattern of the original. Next, insert transitions where necessary and combine sentences so as to eliminate choppiness and repetition. If you have taken a key word or phrase directly from the text, be sure to enclose it in quotation marks (""). Finally, check for correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
8. As a final test, ask yourself if someone who had not read the piece would get a clear and correct idea of its contents by reading your summary.

from Madden, Janet, and Sara M. Blake. *Crosscurrents: Themes for Developing Writers*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992.