

Writing a Summary

In writing a summary, the idea is to reproduce faithfully the gist—the main ideas—of the passage without rewriting most of the piece. You will restate the author’s ideas in your own words. In general, keep it brief and straightforward, as usually you will want to respond to it in some way afterwards. You will be putting the author’s main ideas in your own words, using words from the article to support or show, but be careful not to make your summary just a string of quotes; it needs to be a coherent whole.

Read the passage carefully, being alert for the writer’s purpose (why is he/she writing this?), the controlling idea, the major supporting points, and important terms.

Underline the main idea so you can refer back to it easily. Mark any particularly strong statements which show what the author thinks.

Annotate as you read, jotting down questions about what the author says or means, how ideas in the passage are connected. Use your own symbols to mark up the passage (circling words you don’t know, using: ?, !, or *, for example); make summary notes in the margins.

Consider the author’s biases and assumptions—the things the writer believes in that are not obviously stated, but are present when you “read between the lines.” Also understand the tone the author takes in writing about this issue. What does that tell you about how he/she feels?

In writing the summary:

- ❖ Use the author’s entire name in your first sentence, but in later sentences use his/her last name only. State the name of the article in your first sentence. Use quotes around the titles of articles, and underline books. Use present tense verbs with the author’s name. Write: “Manning says,” “Payton explains,” etc.
- ❖ State early on the author’s main idea/purpose. Then show the connections between supporting ideas. Use your own wording and your own writing style.
- ❖ Use quotations effectively to support and show, but don’t overdo it. Often, you can make the quotation part of your own sentence:

In Johnson’s “Way of the West,” he argues that the myth of the cowboy as a “self-made man battling the elements by use of his survival instincts” does not tell the whole truth.
- ❖ Keep your own ideas and opinions out of your summary, and do not change the author’s meaning in any way.
- ❖ Repeat the author’s last name from time to time for transition.
- ❖ Keep the summary short—about ¼ the original.