

How, Why, and When to Write an Academic Summary

In some cases, whether it be in a professional or academic setting, you may be asked to summarize a reading passage, in which case you are asked to take a large chunk of text of several pages and condense it to only a page or less.

Therefore, the purpose is to convey to your audience the main point and supporting points of the reading. While doing this, make sure that you do not leave out important information. Similarly, you should not include minor details. Finally, you should be careful not to include your personal opinion of the reading passage.

To understand when it is best to summarize, you should distinguish among quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing, three methods of citing material you use from other sources. Keep in mind when writing papers in university courses that whether you quote, paraphrase, or summarize, you will need to cite the author and page or date in your text and include a list of works cited at the end of a paper.

Quoting, the direct wording of a source into your own writing, is used for several reasons:

- Wording of the source is memorable, and rewording it would destroy the meaning.
- The words of reliable and respected authorities will bolster (support) your position.
- You may want to highlight the author's opinions.
- You may wish to cite an expert whose opinion either challenges or differs greatly from those of other experts.
- You want to discuss the source's choice of words.

You can introduce a quote several ways:

John Sanderson has an opinion about giving: "To give is to give with all of one's heart" (35).

John Sanderson said, "To give is to give with all of one's heart" (35).

"To give is to give with all of one's heart," ***said John Sanderson*** (35).

John Sanderson said that "to give is to give with all of one's heart" (35).

"To give is to give," ***said John Sanderson,*** "with all of one's heart" (35).

Use a variety of verbs to introduce quotes, paraphrases, and summaries:

acknowledge, admit, agree, analyze, argue, assert, believe, claim, comment, concede, conclude, confirm, consider, criticize, describe, disagree, discuss, dispute, emphasize, explain, express, find, illustrate, interpret, maintain, note, observe, oppose, point out, refute, remark, report, respond, show, speculate, state, suggest, think, write

Paraphrase is when you restate a source in your own words without adding any opinion to the source's ideas. Basically, you are retelling the information in roughly the same number of words.

- To avoid intellectual stealing, or plagiarism, you must use different words and grammar to convey the ideas when paraphrasing.
- Learn to find synonyms. Choose 15 to 20 words in a reading passage and think of synonyms for these words. Try not to look up the words in the dictionary.
- Use only your notes when writing a paraphrase of part of a reading passage. If you have not taken any notes, paraphrase without looking at the reading passage. After writing a paraphrase, you can check your paraphrase with the original reading passage to see if your writing was factually accurate and if you used different grammatical structures.
- Preventing you from quoting too much, paraphrasing is good for ordinary material which is not especially important.

Summarizing presents only the main ideas of a source, without the details and examples. It is made up of words supplied by the writer.

- Summary allows you to condense large amounts of writing from a source into your own writing.
- Summaries should provide balanced coverage of a source and should avoid any hint of agreement or disagreement with them.

Tips on Writing an Effective Summary

1. Before you summarize a piece of writing—

- Notice the title (these often state the main idea)
- Read the essay once, quickly, for meaning and to identify confusing words.
- Read the essay again, understanding key ideas and writing down notes and questions in the margins.
- Identify the author's thesis or main point.
- Identify the points the author offers in support of the main point. Be careful to distinguish between the most and least important points; your summary should include only the most important ones.
- To help you understand what the author thinks is important, notice which ideas get the most coverage. Which are explained most fully? Read with special care the topic sentence of each paragraph and the first and last paragraphs of the work.
- Remember that some ideas may be implied, not directly written

2. Your written summary of an article should include—

- The author, title, and source of the original
- The main idea or thesis of the original in your own words
- The most important supporting ideas or points of the original in your own words

Summary A: In “Two Childhoods” student Cheryl Parris contrasts her mother’s childhood on a farm in South Carolina and her own childhood in New York City. As a child, the author’s mother enjoyed simple, slow-paced country activities like swimming in rivers and mending birds’ wings, whereas Ms. Parris’s fast paced youth was crammed with such urban activities as movie-going, parties, and shopping. Their personalities differed as much as and perhaps because of their lifestyles. As a girl, the mother was known as caring, respectful, and content with nature and invented games. Ms. Parris, however, describes herself as “petulant, pigheaded, demanding, and unstable”—very focused on material possessions. Now she seems to have examined her values, however, and wishes her childhood had been more like her mother’s.

3. Your written summary of an article should not include—

- Specific facts or statistics
- Specific details, examples
- Your opinion of the text

Summary B: This excellent essay is by Ms. Cheryl Parris, student. I enjoyed reading about Cheryl’s mother, who grew up on a farm in South Carolina, When Cheryl was young, her mother told stories about her own childhood. Cheryl loved those tales and still thinks of them. It was intriguing to hear about life thirty years before her life began. What fascinated her most, however, were the differences between the mother’s youth and hers. The mother’s days were filled with swimming in nearby lakes and rivers, climbing and falling out of trees. Life in the country is definitely easier than life in the city. Although the rural pace of life is slower, nature can teach you many things. Cheryl lived in the city, so she missed out. I liked the writer’s honesty; she admits that she was not a nice child.