

The Writing Lab

Summaries (1)

handout courtesy of Dr. Lori Williams

A summary is a condensed version of a source written in your own words. It represents the main points of the original in shortened form. In a pure summary, the ideas are only those of the original source, with no responses or reactions. There are several reasons for writing summaries: to better understand the original, to explain the main points of the original to someone else, and to include the ideas from the original in another piece of writing (as in a research paper). In some disciplines, students are required to write summaries of their own longer papers. The purpose of this handout is to walk you through the process of writing an academic summary.

Step One: Read the original text carefully and repeatedly.

Writing a good summary begins with a careful reading of the original source. Read it more than once. Be an active reader, thinking and questioning as you go. Underline the main points or mark them in the margins. It is important at this stage to fully understand the original source, to know what the author is saying and how he or she is saying it.

Step Two: List the original text's main ideas and arguments.

After you have read the source more than once and feel that you understand it, try making your own list of the main points from the source. Start with the author's main idea, explaining it in your own words, and then list the author's supporting ideas. Look back at the original to be sure that you have included all of the main points.

Step Three: Write the first draft of the summary.

The next step is to write a draft of your summary. Begin your draft by identifying the original source and author, either in the title (in a self-contained summary), in your text, and/or by citing the source. At this stage, try to set aside the original and concentrate on putting your list of the author's points into your own words. Imagine yourself explaining the original to someone who hasn't read it. You want to present the author's main points accurately, but you also want the summary to communicate in your own words.

Step Four: Review the original text and summary draft for accuracy.

When you have a full draft, check the original text for accuracy. You can also change any words or phrases from the original that may have crept into your writing. It is usually permissible to include brief direct quotation from the original, indicated with quotation marks.

Step Five: Edit summary for mechanics, grammar, and spelling.

Edit your summary for clarity and smoothness. Make sure that you have used complete sentences. Add transitions to indicate how ideas are connected. Proofread for errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar. Remember that a summary presents someone else's ideas (except for summaries of your own papers, where the source is obvious). To avoid plagiarism, indicate the source clearly as the assignment or task requires it.