Summary Writing

When writing abstracts, reviews, annotations, or reports, you must concisely summarize information found in the original document and often take what is presented by another author/other authors and express it in your own words. This requirement seems reasonably straightforward, but many students have difficulties in determining how much of the original content should be included in the summary. The process described below can mitigate this problem.

**Step 1:** Read the document you want to summarize while focusing only on understanding the author's ideas. Take no notes at this stage, and try not to focus on particular details. Your singular interest at this point is to gain a comprehensive view of the article as a whole.

**Step 2:** Read the document again, but this time focus more on the details. Specifically, categorize each paragraph in the text by asking the question:

**What does this paragraph do?**

**Note:** The question is not “What does this paragraph say?” If you ask this question of each paragraph, you will summarize everything. So first you must determine what role each paragraph has in contributing to the full text.

**What Can a Paragraph Do?**

- Identify the general topic
- State the author’s position/thesis
- Provide background information
- Pose a research question
- Establish context for an example
- Set up a bridge between two ideas
- Explain a major point of evidence
- Explain a minor or sub-point of evidence
- Connect one point to another, secondary point
- Conclude an argument
Some of the roles listed above are not usually important enough to include in a summary. However, depending on the circumstances and the discipline, you will have to use your best judgment to determine which of those roles should be included.

**Step 3:** By process of elimination, go through your list of paragraph roles for the document you are summarizing and cross out any paragraphs with content that is unimportant to the major ideas in the original text.

**Example:**

**Paragraph 1**—This paragraph tells a short story to provide background information.

**Paragraph 2**—This paragraph explains the author’s main argument.

**Paragraph 3**—This paragraph picks up the thread of the story from the first paragraph.

**Paragraph 4**—This paragraph offers a statistic that backs up the argument.

Then, for those paragraphs you keep, you can write a few sentences summarizing what they say, only more succinctly.

**Step 4:** At this stage, you write an initial draft of your summary. Do not be too concerned with length requirements at this point, as you will almost certainly have to revise the draft to condense the writing and eliminate unnecessary content.

Stylistically, it is permissible (and sometimes even preferred) if you are conventional in your writing. For this reason, consider drafting an opening sentence that includes as many of the following components as possible:

- The title of the text
- The date of publication
- The author’s name
- The source
- The general topic
- The author’s thesis

Ex. In his 2011 *Scientific Marvels* study of particle miniaturization entitled “The Elephant in the Room: Domestic Applications of Mass Subatomization”, Henry Pym contends that size reduction is a technology not limited to only industrial-scale projects.