

Why and How to Summarize

Summary: a short overview of the main points of something (such as a text, lecture, or presentation)

A good summary will

- Begin with a sentence naming the author and title of the source and restating the main argument (for a summary of a whole source or long passage)
- Be shorter than the original text
- Accurately include the major points of the original
- Avoid including extraneous detail or minor points
- Generally avoid quotations
- Usually retain the same order/structure and tone of the original source but restate the content in the summarizer's own words

Why Summarize?

Formal writing usually focuses on argument or analysis, but summary is still an invaluable skill for prewriting and overall written efficiency. If you have multiple sources for an assignment, they might start to run together, making it difficult to determine what you want to say about them. Summarizing sources as you go provides an easy way to keep the main points of each source straight. In fact, some formal prewriting assignments (such as annotated bibliographies and literature reviews) actually hinge on a combination of source summaries and quick explanations of how each source may relate to a broader claim. Even if you only have one or two sources, writing a summary for each can help you organize your understanding before you write. For example, if an assignment asks you to compare and contrast one source with another, writing a summary of each source can distill the main ideas in each. Before you write, you can compare the summaries and note any similarities or differences. Although you likely will not include extended summary in final drafts, even sentence-level summary can make your writing more efficient. For instance, if you need to include the title, author, and time period of a particular text, you may be tempted to put each of those elements in its own sentence. If you master summarizing, you will be more likely to combine all those background details into a single sentence, leaving room for more analytic or argumentative content. In short, summary can make both the writing process and your actual writing more efficient and effective.

How to Summarize

1. Read/view your source multiple times to make sure you understand it.
2. Take notes and underline important ideas as you read.
3. Look back at your notes and identify the main argument and main points.
4. Draft your summary.
5. Read your summary and reread the original source to make sure they align "in structure, in emphasis, [and] in tone."
6. Revise your summary as necessary.