

Summaries



The job of writing a summary is often confusing to students. Does the teacher want a sentence or two, or a couple of pages? How much information should actually be provided in a good summary? Sometimes the teacher will tell you how long to make a summary, but even then, how are you to know what to put in and what to leave out?

Features of a good summary

Essentially, a summary is a condensed version of something, usually a text. A good summary is concise, focusing on the main ideas and leaving out much of the supporting and explanatory detail of the original text. A good summary is also complete, covering all of the important ideas found in the primary text. Moreover, a summary should be objective; the goal should be to cover the text fairly, without inserting your own opinion or perspective. For this reason, a summary is not really an essay. An essay requires the writer to create an original text, as in an argument wherein

you assert a point of view, or a research paper in which you synthesize and analyze the work of many others.

Be concise

In a concise summary, a writer captures the main ideas of a text in a few well-chosen words and reduces supporting information down to a few representative details. A good strategy for capturing the key ideas is to go through the entire text and write the main point of each paragraph in the margin or on note paper. Then, go over your notes and ask yourself how each paragraph fits into the author's overall project: Why is it there? How does the paragraph advance the author's argument? This step of shifting from what is there, to why it is there is absolutely essential in a good summary — it will help you to characterize the work as a whole, showing how the parts fit together.

Be complete

Though the goal in summary writing is to be concise and eliminate unnecessary supporting details, it is also important not to misrepresent a work by leaving out important sections of an author's text. If an author spends a substantial amount of time and space on a topic, your summary should include at least a brief explanation of why that section is there. A complete summary is one that does not skip over key points.

Be objective

It is important in summary writing to leave out any evaluative comments, personal examples, and opinions. Even seemingly innocent adjectives used to describe an author's work, such as "thoughtful work" or "important insight" are not okay in a summary. A summary should be an objective and open-minded representation of an author's work.

Provide an introduction

A good summary generally begins with a brief introduction to let the reader know that what follows will be a summary of another text and not the writer's own response to a text or the writer's own ideas. The introduction may be a sentence or two or a paragraph depending on the length of the summary. It is important to characterize the work as a whole — what you think the writer was trying to accomplish in the work, or what the author's overall purpose seems to be. In addition, the writer and title of the

work being summarized should be named in the introduction, even if the author and/or text has been identified in a title.

The following is a good example of an introduction for a short summary:

In his essay “The Monument & the Bungalow,” Pierce Lewis encourages his readers to re-see the world around them — the neighborhoods, cities, parks, and monuments—as historical texts as significant as the history books read in school.

This introduction tells the reader that what follows will be a summary of Lewis’ work, and identifies Lewis’ thesis.

Preparing to write a summary while you read

To write a good summary, you need to have a good understanding of the text you are summarizing — the main ideas of each section or paragraph, the key details, the author’s method of development, etc. When preparing to write a summary of a text, as you read, figure out what you think the point of each section is and, more importantly, how that section helps you to better understand the author’s main point. Ask yourself “Why is this here?” You might begin your summary of each section with one of the tags below:

The author . . .

- builds on this idea
- introduces
- discusses the next step
- gives an example
- puts the argument in a larger context
- summarizes
- adds a new point

Avoiding common grammar mistakes when introducing a summary

common mistake 1: implied subject

original version: In Pierce Lewis’ essay “The Monument and the Bungalow,” he encourages his readers. . .

corrected version: In “The Monument and the Bungalow,” Pierce Lewis encourages his readers ...

When a noun is used in the possessive case (John’s, the President’s, our Dog’s, etc.) it becomes an adjective describing a noun (John’s hat, the President’s policy) rather than a noun in the sentence. The sentence above is grammatically incorrect because the antecedent for the pronoun he is not a noun but an adjective — the pronoun he is referring back to a subject, but since the subject is not really named in the sentence, an agreement problem is the result.

common mistake 2, misplaced comma

original version: In his essay “The Monument and the Bungalow”, Pierce Lewis encourages his readers . . .

corrected version: In his essay “The Monument and the Bungalow,” Pierce Lewis encourages his readers . . .

In the above sentence, the comma is placed outside the closing quote, but the rule says that commas and periods should go inside closing quotes. For more information, explore the lessons on comma rules in the Grammar & Style Lab.

What are summaries good for?

A summary is a very useful tool. Summaries allow people to share information quickly and efficiently, such as when a person tells the story of an interesting thing that happened on the way to work, a scientist publishes the results of months of research, or a news reporter describes developing tensions in war-torn countries. Summaries also help people remember things, such as the important ideas in books that might end up being useful in writing a research paper, or key points in a history text or lecture. Teachers ask students to write summaries to show the students’ understanding of the curriculum. And summaries can also be effective evidence in an argument.

How long should my summary be?

Summaries can vary in length from a single sentence to many pages, depending on the length of the text (or events) being summarized, and/or the purpose of the summary. Consider, for example, Julius Caesar’s famous statement, “*Veni, vidi, vici*” (“I came, I

saw, I conquered”), summarizing his swift military triumph over Pharnaces in Zela. Now consider Cassius Dio’s more detailed summary of the same event:

. . . on ascertaining that Caesar was on the way and was hurrying into Armenia, [Pharnaces] turned back and met him there near Zela. For now that Ptolemy was dead and Domitius vanquished, Caesar had decided that his delay in Egypt was neither creditable nor profitable to him, and had set out from there and had come with great speed into Armenia. And so the barbarian, alarmed and fearing Caesar’s rapidity much more than his army, sent messengers to him before he drew near, making frequent proposals to see if he might on some terms or other except the present danger. One of the principal pleas that he presented was that he had not cooperated with Pompey, and he hoped to induce Caesar to grant a truce, particularly since the latter was anxious to hasten to Italy and Africa; and once Caesar was gone, he hoped to wage war again at his ease. Caesar suspected this, and do treated the first and second embassies with great kindness, in order that he might fall upon his foes as unexpectedly as possible because of his hopes of peace; but when the third deputation came, he uttered various reproaches against him one being that he had deserted Pompey, his benefactor. Then he no longer delayed, but immediately, that very day and just as he came from the march, joined battle. For a little while some confusion was caused him by the enemy’s cavalry and scythe-bearing chariots, but after that he conquered with his heavy-armed troops. Pharnaces escaped into the sea and later tried to force his way into Bosphorus, but Asander repulsed and killed him.

—Roman History, Cassius Dio. trans. Earnest Carey.

Caesar’s version simply proclaims his triumph to the world — basically, he gives an ancient version of a modern political slogan or sound bite. Providing more details about the battle would only muddy the main point — i.e., that Caesar is a great leader. The Roman senator Cassius, on the other hand, is more concerned with preserving the details of Roman military history for future generations, and so he includes more detail in his summary. Both summaries are good given their different purposes.