

Reading to Write: Summarizing

Summarizing a text, or distilling its essential concepts into a paragraph or two, is a useful study tool as well as good writing practice. A summary has **two aims**: (1) to reproduce the overarching ideas in a text, identifying the **general** concepts that run through the entire piece, and (2) to express these overarching ideas using **precise**, specific language. When you summarize, you cannot rely on the language the author has used to develop his or her points, and you must find a way to give an overview of these points without your own sentences becoming too general. You must also make decisions about which concepts to leave in and which to omit, taking into consideration your purposes in summarizing and also your view of what is important in this text. Here are some methods for summarizing:

- a. Include the **title** and identify the **author** in your first sentence.
- b. The first sentence or two of your summary should contain the author's **thesis**, or central concept, stated in your own words. This is the idea that runs through the entire text--the one you'd mention if someone asked you: "What is this piece/article about?" Unlike student essays, the main idea in a primary document or an academic article may not be stated in one location at the beginning. Instead, it may be gradually developed throughout the piece or it may become fully apparent only at the end.
- c. When summarizing a longer article, try to see how the various **stages** in the explanation or argument are built up in **groups** of related paragraphs. **Divide** the article into sections if it isn't done in the published form. Then, write a sentence or two to cover the key ideas in each section.
- d. **Omit** ideas that are not really central to the text. Don't feel that you must reproduce the author's exact progression of thought. (On the other hand, be careful not to misrepresent ideas by omitting important aspects of the author's discussion).
- e. In general, omit minor **details** and specific **examples**. (In some texts, an extended example may be a key part of the argument, so you would want to mention it).
- f. **Avoid** writing **opinions** or personal responses in your summaries (save these for active reading responses or tutorial discussions).
- g. Be careful not to plagiarize the author's words. If you do use **even a few** of the author's words, they must appear in **quotation marks**. To avoid plagiarism, try writing the first draft of your summary without looking back at the original text.