



How to Write a Summary

Throughout your undergraduate years, you will often be required to write summaries of texts. They will either be required by your professors in the form of class assignments, or you can even do them voluntarily as a means to make sense of the text at hand. Either way, it is a necessary skill to master which will prove beneficial in your studies. When you write a summary, you demonstrate your understanding of the text and communicate it to your reader. Therefore, to summarize a text is to distill its main ideas in your own words. You need to extract and elaborate the main ideas such as the thesis statements, supporting arguments etc. and exclude extraneous details. Well written summaries provide an overview of the reading as opposed to focusing on one part of the text.

When to Summarize

As discussed above, there will be many instances where you will be required to write a summary. It could be an assignment comprising a one - two page summary of a text or you may be asked to include a brief summary of the reading as part of a larger response/reflection assignment. In addition, you could also write summaries of articles/readings as part of the note-taking and research process of a larger research paper assignment.



Characteristics of a Summary

1. It should be comprehensive: this means that you should clearly identify and outline the main premise, arguments, and conclusions of the reading.
2. It should be coherent and concise: one necessary skill is to differentiate between crucial and extraneous information. A good summary is one that focuses on providing an overview of the text as opposed to fixating on minute details. It should also be coherent, i.e. the ideas must be linked to one another, such that the reader can easily make sense of them.
3. It should be able to stand alone. This doesn't mean that you have to include your analysis/critique of the reading; that is not what a summary entails. It simply means that the reader, after reading your summary, should know exactly what the reading is about without having to go over the text.
4. Generally, a summary is about one third the length of the original which is also the highest original-to-summary ratio.

Summarizing Shorter Texts (10 pages or fewer)

These types of texts can be summarized using what is called the reverse outline method. Write one sentence summarizing each paragraph; each sentence should highlight the main idea of the paragraph. Do this until you can see each paragraph's main idea. The next step is to write one line summarizing the whole reading; this will be the thesis statement of the reading, i.e. the main premise. Now formulate a paragraph: begin with the thesis statement and write the topic sentences for each paragraph next. Finally, review the paragraph and edit it. Rearrange ideas, edit sentences and provide transitions for better flow. This step is crucial as it pertains to organizing the summary in a way to ensure coherency of ideas presented.



Summarizing Longer Texts (more than 10 pages)

These can be trickier to deal with due to their length, but the key here is to break the text down into sections, either by themes or arguments. Next, write a one sentence summary for each section. Look at the author's thesis statement; this should be present in the introduction. Then formulate a one sentence summary of the entire text. Next, formulate a paragraph using all the one-liner summaries. Lastly, edit and rearrange the paragraph(s) to ensure coherency: group similar arguments together, revise sentences to avoid repetition, focus on word usage and use appropriate transitions. And there you have it, a summary of a longer text!

For reference purposes, the following section includes a sample summary.



Sample Text and Summary

“What is this thing that has happened to us? It’s a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus. Some believe it’s God’s way of bringing us to our senses. Others that it’s a Chinese conspiracy to take over the world. Whatever it is, the coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”¹

Summary - Paragraph 1:

The author mentions the various theories that have been put forth for the origins of the virus. Some talk about it in scientific terms, while others chalk it up to Chinese conspiracy theories. Whatever may be the cause, Arundhati argues that there is no doubt that the virus has significantly altered and shaken the foundations of our world as we know it. Amidst the unfurling of our existing order, we are yearning for a sense of normalcy. However, according to Roy, normalcy shouldn’t be our aim at all.

¹ *The Pandemic is a Portal* by Arundhati Roy, 2020.



Paragraph 2:

Throughout history, pandemics have forced societies to take note of their systems and its failings. It has forced them out of the stupor of inequality, greed and corruption to a prosperous path. If we pay attention and chose to take action for change. We can take this rupture and treat it as a minor glitch in our trajectory or we can choose to reassess and fight for a better world; it all depends on us.