



Learn to Summarize

In this handout, we'll look at how to summarize. A summary is a condensed version of a passage. Similar to paraphrasing, summarizing involves using your own words and writing style to express another author's ideas. Unlike the paraphrase, which presents important details, the summary presents only the most important ideas of the passage.

When do I Summarize?

Summarize a passage when you simply want to give your readers a brief overview of a text.

How do I Summarize?

When summarizing, follow the guidelines listed below:

- * Include only the main points of the original passage
- * Do not worry about following the original order of ideas.
- * Keep the length down to no more than half the length of the original.

Writing a summary essentially takes four steps:

1. Identify the main points of the passage. In some paragraphs, the main idea is expressed in the topic sentence, yet in others, it may not be explicitly stated at all. Additionally, a passage may contain one or more points that are vital to its meaning. These elements must be mentioned in your summary. However, you **will not** include **all the details**, as you do in a paraphrase. Instead, only choose the most important.
2. Organize and present these main points in a coherent way. Be careful not to use the author's words or to follow the sentence structure of the original passage.
3. Make sure that you are faithful to the meaning of the source and that you have accurately represented the main ideas.
4. Cite appropriately and integrate the summary into the text effectively. Consult the APA or MLA manual or the Academic Center's Quick Guides for information on how to cite and the Academic Center handout "Signal the Use of a Source" for ideas on how to integrate paraphrased information.

Example Summaries

Let's look at two examples of summarized material. In each of the summaries, you'll notice that we've documented by including the author/year at the end of the passage. Other documentation styles may employ a different technique. Additionally, you'll probably want to vary how you incorporate source material into your paper. The handout "Signal the Use on a Source" can give you some ideas on integrating source material.



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Original Passage I:

Height connotes status in many parts of the world. Executive offices are usually on the top floors; the underlings work below. Even being tall can help a person succeed. Studies have shown that employers are more willing to hire men over 6 feet tall than shorter men with the same credentials. Studies of real-world executives and graduates have shown that taller men make more money. In one study, every extra inch of height brought in an extra \$1,300 a year. But being too big can be a disadvantage. A tall, brawny football player complained that people found him intimidating off the field and assumed he "had the brains of a Twinkie." (p. 301)

---Locker, K. O. (2003). *Business and administrative communication* (6th ed.). St. Louis, MO: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.

Let's first identify the main points in the original passage.

Topic sentence: "Height connotes status in many parts of the world."

Main point: "Even being tall can help a person succeed."

Main point: "Executive offices are usually on the top"

Main point: "being too big can be a disadvantage"

For this example, we'll look at multiple summaries. As you read the sample summaries below determine if the main points were included and if the unimportant points were discarded. Also check to see if both wording and sentence structure do not follow those of the original.

Summary A:

Throughout the world, being tall will lead to professional success. In fact, research shows that employers are more likely to hire taller men and to pay them more, as compared to shorter men with the same qualifications (Locker, 2003).

[This summary is too brief. Further, it changes the meaning slightly, giving the impression that being tall guarantees success.]

Summary B:

In most countries, height suggests status. For instance, higher executives normally use top floors of office buildings. Further, research shows that men over six feet tall are more likely to be hired than those shorter than them but with the same qualifications. Taller men also receive greater incomes, possibly as much as \$1,300 a year more than those only one inch shorter than them. However, as a tall and muscular football player points out, a disadvantage to being tall is that some individuals may perceive you as threatening or even dumb (Locker, 2003).

[This summary is too long. Instead of focusing on the main points, it includes all of the details that are in the original passage.]

Summary C:

Though height may connote slowness to some people, in the business world, it is almost universally associated with success. For example, taller men are more likely to be hired and to have greater salaries. Further, those in top positions within a company are more likely to work on the top floors of office buildings (Locker, 2003).

[This summary is the most effective. In addition to including all of the main points, it leaves out the unimportant details.]



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Original Passage II:

. . . [Cleanthes, addressing himself to Demea] . . . Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence. (p53)

--Hume, D. (1990). *Dialogues concerning natural religion*. London: Penguin Books.

This passage is a little more difficult than the previous passage. The topic sentence in this passage is not the first sentence, where you may often find the topic sentence of the paragraph or passage; however, you'll follow the same procedures for writing a summary of this passage.

“Topic Sentence” (main point of paragraph): existence of a deity proved by analogy
Main point: the analogy shows that by a cause-effect relationship a deity is similar to human mind and intelligence

Summary

Through analogy, Cleanthes argues that a deity comparable to human intellect exists (Hume, 1990).

You have quite a bit of flexibility with summary. In this example, we've just summarized the main point of the passage; however, you could also summarize the analogy that Cleanthes makes. What you summarize depends largely on why you are summarizing the material. The decision of “what to summarize” is a decision that you have to make since you are familiar with your writing situation. You can find some guidelines in the handout titled “How to Decide when to Quote, Paraphrase, and Summarize.”

Exercises

Now, let's try some exercises to check your understanding of how to summarize.

Exercise I:

Knowing how to argue is a useful skill. We use it on ourselves in order to arrive at decisions; we use it with others as we discuss business strategies or policy changes on committees, as members of the local PTA, a law office, an environmental action group; we use it as fundraisers for a cause, like saving whales, we use it in applying for foundation grants and in drafting a letter to the editor of our hometown paper; we use it when we discuss child abuse, toxic waste, tax cuts, pothole repair, working mothers, and university investment policies. Our ability to express opinions persuasively—to present our views systematically as arguments—will allow us to make some difference in public life. If we lack the necessary skills, we are condemned to sit on the sidelines. Instead of doing the moving, we will be among the moved; more persuasive voices will convince us of what we must do. (pp. 222-223).



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--Hall, B. & Birkerts, S. (1998). *Writing well* (9th ed.). New York: Longman.

Topic Sentence: Knowing how to argue is a useful skill.

For this exercise, you'll have to choose the main points. Circle the main points from the passage in the selection of sentences/phrases below.

1. "We must use it on ourselves in order to arrive at decisions"
2. "members of the local PTA"
3. "we use it with others"
4. "drafting a letter to the editor of our hometown paper"
5. "Our ability . . . will allow us to make some difference in public life"
6. "we are condemned to sit on the sidelines"
7. "saving whales"

Once you've identified the main points in the passage you can check your answers by looking at the small text on the bottom of the next page. Your next step will be to draft a summary based on the main points that you've chosen. Use the space below to write down your summary.

My Sample Summary:

You can see one way to summarize this passage by looking at the small text on the bottom of the next page.

In exercises II and III, you'll have to identify the topic sentence and main points. Then, draft a summary based on that information. UHV students can schedule an appointment with an Academic Center tutor who can discuss summary with you. Stop by the Center, room 122, University Center, or call (361) 570-4288 to find out how you can schedule an appointment. You can also send in your summary to the online tutors if you include the passage you're summarizing. Email your summary and the passage as an email attachment to tutor@uhv.edu.

Exercise II:

Audiences want the sense that you're talking directly to them and that you care that they understand and are interested. They'll forgive you if you get tangled up in a sentence and end it ungrammatically. They won't forgive you if you seem to have a "canned" talk that you're going to deliver no matter who the audience is or how they respond. You can convey a sense of caring to your audience by making direct eye contact with them and by using a conversational style. (p. 475)

---Locker, K. O. (2003). *Business and administrative communication* (6th ed.). St. Louis, MO: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.



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Exercise III:

Writing a memo is essentially like writing any other form of technical communication. First you have to understand your audience and purpose. Then you gather your information, create some sort of outline, write a draft, and revise it. Making the memo look like a memo—adding the structural features that your readers will expect—is relatively simple. Your software has templates, or you can build the structure into your outline or shape the draft at some later stage. (p. 424).

--Markel, M. (1996). *Technical communication: Situations and strategies*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Exercise IV:

Vocalizations that might be construed as symbols of various sorts in different animals are usually accompanied by gestures. One student found that only 3 percent of the signals among rhesus monkeys were not accompanied by gestures. Whatever animals express through sounds seems to reflect not a logical sequence of thoughts but a sequence accompanying a series of emotional states. Animals' communicative activities thus differ from human language in that they consist essentially of signs not arbitrary symbols. (p.470)

--Finegan, E. (1994). *Language its structure and use* (2nd ed.). Fortworth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

If you wish to practice your paraphrase or summary skills more, you can pick up the handout titled "Paraphrase/Summary Practice," which contains more sample exercises.

Exercise I: Choose the Main Points

In addition to the topic sentence, numbers 1, 3, and 5 represent the more important points in this paragraph.

Exercise I: Read a Sample Summary

The ability to argue is valuable because we use it for so many reasons: both to make choices for ourselves and to persuade others. Without this ability to argue we lose our power to affect change (Hall & Birkerts, 1998).

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