A Guide to Summarizing

What is a summary?
A summary is a brief description of the main ideas or concepts in an essay, article or story. It is very useful in determining what information is necessary and what information acts as ‘filler’; that is, what are unnecessary details. It is often an account of someone else’s ideas and so it is important to give credit to the author. When somebody reads your summary they should be able to get a clear idea of what the essay, article or story is about without actually reading the original.

How do you write a summary?
When writing a summary, it is useful to know what to include.

- Identify the most important ideas in the essay or article.
- Examine how the author supports these ideas and what these ideas show or prove.
- Try not to include details that are irrelevant.

Summarizing essays and articles is different from summarizing works of fiction. When you are summarizing an essay or an article keep in mind the following:

- What is the author trying to prove? (What is the thesis statement?)
- How does the author go about proving his/her thesis? (e.g. does he/she use examples, references or other means?)
- What are the main ideas that support what the author is trying to prove?

Here are some tips to help you write a summary:

- Use the title, the first paragraph, the concluding paragraph and any special print features or diagrams to help you find the author’s thesis or central point.
- Examine concluding paragraphs closely. They often contain mini-summaries.
- When you read the middle or supporting paragraphs, ask yourself what purpose they serve. Their primary purpose is to introduce points of support—you need those!
- Pay close attention to the topic sentences of the supporting paragraphs.
- Pay attention to transitional words and phrases that act as signals. E.g. Another reason is....
- Leave out extended examples. In summarizing, these examples are unnecessary.
- Make it very clear to the reader that you are presenting the author’s ideas, not your own. Use phrases like ‘According to the author...’, or ‘The author concludes that...’
- Paraphrase the author’s ideas. Don’t ‘copy and paste’.
- Use direct quotations sparingly in your summary. Allow yourself only the very best quotation where the author makes the point in a striking, memorable way.
- Save your critical reactions to the author’s ideas for that part of the assignment that asks you to comment or criticize.