Summarizing Essays and Articles

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 to 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.
- Do not to include details that are irrelevant to your purpose as a summary writer.

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?

A Guide to Summarizing
Here are some tips to help you write a summary:

- The title, the first paragraph, the concluding paragraph and any special print features or diagrams can be very useful in helping you find the author’s thesis or central point.
- Concluding paragraphs—as part of their function—often contain mini-summaries. Examine them closely.
- 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. For example: Another reason is....
- Middle paragraphs may also contain extended examples. In summarizing, these examples are unnecessary.
• In summarizing, 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.
• Remember: When you summarize, you assume the role of **reporter**, not commentator. Save your critical reactions to the author’s ideas for that part of the assignment that asks **you** to comment or criticize.

**Quiz**

1. When you include a summary, you don’t need to cite it. True or False?
   a. True
   b. False

   The correct response is b—false: You still need to cite your sources when you summarize.

2. When summarizing an **article**, which of the following elements is important to include in your summary:
   a. What is the climax (the moment of greatest tension) in the story?
   b. What is the author trying to prove? (What is the thesis statement?)
   c. A funny anecdote that the author included in their article.

   The correct response is b. It is important to include the thesis statement.

3. Below are two versions of a summary of an article. Which of the two paragraphs below makes the **best** summary?
   a. The authors expected that play sessions between dogs who did not know each other would be more asymmetrical in their power dynamic than play sessions between two dogs who are familiar to each other; however the study determined that this was not true. The authors recorded dogs playing in a park and observed elements of each encounter, including the length, asymmetry, and features of the dogs, as well as the ways that the dogs communicated their playful attitude with each other. They found that the asymmetry of the power dynamics was not determined by how familiar the dogs were to each other. They also found that a high level of asymmetry caused the length of the sessions to be shorter. They concluded that dogs avoid fights by signaling their willingness to play, and by shortening the length of the session when there was an asymmetrical power dynamic.
   b. The authors recorded dogs playing in a park in Palerno, Italy in August. They observed elements of each play session. They found that the asymmetry of the power dynamics was not determined by how familiar the dogs were to each other. They also found that a high level of asymmetry caused the length of the sessions to be shorter. They concluded that dogs avoid fights by signaling their willingness to play, and by shortening the length of the session...
of the session when there was an asymmetrical power dynamic.

The correct response is ‘a’. A summary should cover what the author wants to prove, and leave out irrelevant details (in this case, the month and location of the study).


4. In the following questions, indicate whether the statement is **True** or **False**.
   - The more direct quotations from the original text you include in your summary, the better it will be.
     a. True
     b. False

     The correct response is b—false: You should use few direct quotations in your summary.

   - A lot of examples and specific details are important when you are writing an argument, but you should ignore them when your writing task is to summarize someone else’s argument.
     a. True
     b. False

     The correct response is a—true: Specific details and examples can be left out of a summary.

   - It’s fine not to acknowledge the author when you’re summarizing. Everyone will know that the position that you’re stating is not your own.
     a. True
     b. False

     The correct response is b—false: When you are summarizing, you must acknowledge the author.

   - When reading a text that you’re going to summarize, it’s a good idea to read the conclusion early, rather than last.
     a. True
     b. False

     The correct response is a—true: The conclusion can help you find the author’s central point, so you should read it early.

   - Your summary is not complete unless you have stated your opinion about the author’s position on the topic.
a. True
b. False

The correct response is b—false. You should save your opinion for the part of the assignment that asks for your viewpoint.