

WAC Writing Guides

Summary Writing

The goal of a summary—of an article, a chapter, or a book—is to restate as clearly as possible the main ideas of the original work in a much more condensed form and entirely in your own words.

- A summary is an accurate and objective retelling of the main points of the original. It does not include any ideas not found in the original, such as your own thoughts, opinions, or observations about the work you are summarizing or any of its points.
- It concentrates on the main points, omitting details, minor examples, and purely background information.

A summary usually does not include direct quotations or paraphrases of the original source, but if any exact language is included, such as special terms the author uses, these words should be enclosed in quotation marks. A summary is not an analysis or an evaluation. A summary should focus on what the writer says (the ideas and information) and not on what the writer does and how well (the writing strategies and techniques used).

Avoid language that states or implies any judgment of the ideas or the writing.

The following steps will help write a one-paragraph summary of a short work. (The guidelines may be adapted for writing a longer summary.)

I. Take summary notes on the article:

- Read the article several times, noting its main idea (thesis), its most important supporting points, and any important conclusions. A poor understanding of the reading will yield a poor summary.
- Write down the article’s main idea (thesis) in your own words, in a complete sentence.
- Break the article into its major parts or sections, paragraph-by-paragraph, or section by section, depending on the article’s length and complexity.
- Using your own words, write a one- or two-sentence summary of each part or section, making sure that your summary conveys the main idea of that part.

II. Now turn your summary notes into a coherent paragraph.

- Begin with a sentence that names the author and title of the work, and states the work’s main point (its thesis).
- Follow this sentence with the rest of your summary sentences, following the general order of points presented in the original.
- Include present tense signal phrases periodically (“Jenkins writes/notes/reports” or “According to Jenkins”) to orient your reader and to keep you focused on relating the ideas of the text.
- Use direct language to relate the writer’s ideas. Choose precise and accurate verbs (states, argues, suggests, contends, complains, notes), not the vague talks about/writes about.
- Revise your paragraph so that it moves smoothly from one idea to the next. Your finished paragraph should present the article’s main points and show your reader how these ideas connect to one another.
- If your summary is longer than what your assignment calls for, go back and condense ideas that can be condensed, or edit out the least important of the ideas presented.