

Summary Skills

Analyzing summary skills for reading comprehension

The ultimate demonstration of reading comprehension comes in the form of summary. Because of this, expect summaries to play a role in many college writing assignments.

If this causes you any anxiety, consider this helpful advice offered in the article “Relax—You Already Know How to Summarize!”

- A. **Summarizing is extremely easy for humans**, and even a small child almost instinctively knows how to summarize. (Any time a child “tattles” on another, she or he is probably summarizing.)
- B. **Summarizing is a powerful learning tool**. Summarizing, like translating, forces you to “get in bed with the text,” to become intimate with it.
- C. **Summaries are specific, not hazy and lazy**. To describe September 11 as “a time when some terrorists took over a bunch of airplanes and rammed them into buildings” is not a fat-free summary. It already starved to death. The only thing to do with a summary like that is to give it a decent burial in the wastebasket and start over from scratch. In college-level work, the more specific names, dates and facts (who, what, when, where, why, how) that you include, the better the summary is.
- D. **Never include any information or conclusions, no matter how obvious, that were not openly stated in the original text**. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck but your original text failed to call it a duck, you cannot call it a duck in your summary either, as clear as it may be to you and to your readers that it is a duck.
- E. **A summary should never have more than one short quote in every two or three paragraphs** of your own words. Summaries are primarily made of paraphrases, rather than direct quotes.
- F. **Summarizing without the text in front of you is a workout for your working memory**. It is a useful study technique to prepare for university courses where you will need to read, understand, learn and give back a large amount of information or complex ideas and involved reasoning on closed-book essay exams. It will also be useful in the “real world,” where you will have to put all your book-learning to work.
- G. **If you really know a subject, you will be able to summarize it**. If you cannot summarize a subject, even if you have memorized all the facts about it, you can be absolutely sure that you have not learned it. And, if you truly learn the subject, you will still be able to summarize it months or years from now—if you cannot, we have failed. (“Cramming” for an exam is a bad joke—it is not and never was learning!)

What You Will Learn to Do

- analyze annotation strategies
- analyze strategies to paraphrase a text’s thesis statement
- analyze strategies to identify and quote significant passages from a text
- analyze strategies to distinguish a text’s major claims from minor ones

- analyze strategies to convey the essential features of a text to someone who hasn't read it

Video: Annotation

"Annotation is something we all do all the time and can include everything from footnotes to criticism, graffiti to fan fiction. What is social media but spaces where people annotate texts and images, the digital margins of our daily lives?" (Dean, Jeremy and Katherine Schulten. "Skills and Strategies: Annotating to Engage, Analyze, Connect and Create." *The New York Times*. 12 Nov 2015. Web. 20 May 2016.)

Thought about in the way of the quoted passage above, annotation is likely an activity you're already comfortable doing.

It is also a very helpful part of the active reading process, to keep you engaged with the text as you're reading it closely. This video emphasizes that role of annotation, with a few how-to tips.



[How to Annotate a Text \(Links to an external site.\)](#)
[Annotate a Text.pdf](#) 

[Transcript: How to](#)

Finally, annotation is a helpful component of summarizing. Taking notes to yourself while reading closely is the first step of mastering difficult concepts. This will allow you to then be able to interpret and explain those difficult concepts to others.

Paraphrasing a Thesis Statement

We've discussed the fact that every piece of writing has a **thesis statement**, a sentence that captures the main idea of the text. Some are **explicit**—stated directly in the text itself. Others are **implicit**—implied by the content but not written in one distinct sentence.

A key part of understanding a thesis statement of a text is being able to express it in your own words. This paraphrase of a thesis is a key component in summarizing a reading accurately.

The following "How to Identify a Thesis Statement" video offers advice for locating a text's thesis statement. It asks you to write one or two sentences that summarize the text. When you write that summary, without looking at the text itself, you've actually paraphrased the thesis statement.

[Transcript: How to Identify the Thesis Statement.pdf](#) 

Tips for effective paraphrasing

- The statement must be in your own words.

- If you use any phrases that are in the original quote, place them in quotation marks.
- Add a citation—even if a paraphrase is in your own words, it is still someone else’s idea.
- If you’re having difficulty paraphrasing, make a short list of the quote’s main idea(s) and words that relate to it. Incorporate these concepts and words in your paraphrase.

An Example of an Effective Paraphrase

Compare this direct quote, which comes from an article in *The New York Times* discussing the relocation and redevelopment of a train station in New York City, with an effective paraphrase :

Original Quote

“New tracks aside, the challenge is at the bare minimum to bring light and air into this underground purgatory and, beyond that, to create for millions of people a new space worthy of New York, a civic hub in the spirit of the great demolished one, more attuned to the city’s aspirations and democratic ideals.” – Michael Kimmelman, *The New York Times*

Effective Paraphrase

One of the biggest issues facing Penn Station’s revitalization is developing a brighter, airier space. It is an abysmal “underground purgatory,” and with so many New Yorkers and tourists traveling in and out of its doors every day, should be reconstructed to better reflect the endeavors and passions of the city (Kimmelman).

- The paraphrase reflects the same ideas as the original quote, but is in its own words and writing style.
- The term “underground purgatory” is placed in quotes, as it is a unique phrase used in the original quote.
- There is a parenthetical citation, citing the source of the idea.

Using Quotations in a Summary

Clearly, the primary goal of a summary is to interpret a source in your own words. That means that the bulk of a summary that you create should be unique language, not something that you can find in the source itself.

However, there are a few cases where using small, carefully-selected quotations will help strengthen the summary.

Consider these questions when assessing the potential usefulness of a source:

- does the potential quote contain words that are unique or odd?
- does the potential quote illustrate something special about the author’s style?
- is the potential quote difficult to paraphrase?

If the answer to any of these is “yes,” then integrating that quote in your summary might be useful.

Again, the act of annotating your source will be useful. Look through your notes you made while reading to identify phrases that jumped out to you, that might become quotations in a summary.

Summarizing Main Ideas and Details

You’ll remember from the “Supporting Claims” section earlier in this module that one way to analyze a reading is to distinguish its main ideas, its major supporting details, and its minor supporting details.

Review this video to remind yourself of the distinctions between these three things.



[Supporting Details \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Looked at from the perspective of summarizing a source, the distinction between major and minor details becomes very important.

- Summaries naturally want to emphasize the main ideas of a source. All of the main ideas of a reading should be captured in a summary.
- Include major supporting details only if there is enough space, and if they help your audience understand the overall text more clearly.
- Leave out minor supporting details.