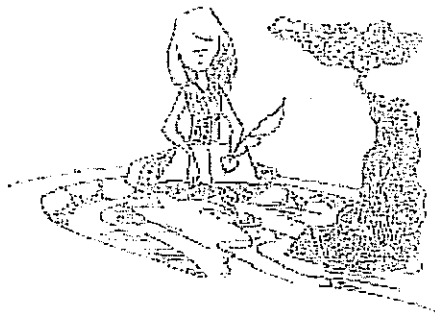


HOW TO WRITE A SUMMARY

In a summary (also referred to as a précis or abstract), you reduce material in an original work to its main points and key supporting details.

The length of your summary will depend on your instructor's expectations and the length of the article. Most often you will be asked to write a summary of one or more paragraphs.

Writing a summary brings together a number of important reading, writing and study skills. To condense the original matter, you must preview, read, evaluate, organize, and, perhaps, outline the assigned material. Summarizing, then, can be a real aid to understanding; you must "get inside" the material and fully realize what is being said before you can reduce its meaning to a few words.



1. Take a few minutes to preview the text. Look at the opening paragraph(s), any headings or subheadings and any conclusion(s).
2. Read the book or article for all you can understand the first time through. Don't slow down or turn back. Check main points and key supporting details. Pay special attention to all the items noted in the preview. Also, look for definitions, examples, and enumerations. You can also identify important points by turning any headings into questions and reading to find the answers to the questions.
3. Go back and re-read more carefully the areas you have identified as most important.
Also, focus on other key points you may have missed in your first reading.
4. Take notes on the material. Concentrate on getting down the main ideas and the key supporting points.
5. Prepare the first draft of your summary, keeping these points in mind:
 - a. At the start of the summary identify the title and author of the work. Include in parentheses the place of publication, publisher, and publication date.
 - b. Don't write an overly detailed summary. Remember the purpose of a summary is to reduce the original work to its main points and essential supporting details.
 - c. Express the main points and supporting details in your own words! Do not imitate or stay too close to the style of the original work.

- d. Quote from the original only to illustrate key points.
- e. Preserve the balance and proportion of the original work. If the original spent 40 pages on one area and only 3 pages on another, your summary should reflect that emphasis.
- f. Revise the first draft, paying attention to the principles of effective writing (unity, support, organization, and clear, error-free sentences).
- g. Write the final draft of the paper.

A MODEL SUMMARY:

Here is a model summary of a magazine article.

In an article titled "On Magic in Medicine" (Human Nature, January 1979), Lewis Thomas describes the widespread tendency to create easy and simplistic explanations for our most serious diseases. In the past, for example, many people believed tuberculosis was caused by night air and insufficient sunlight. This untested theory remained widely accepted until science identified the single proven cause of the disease: the tubercle bacillus. Today there is a popular theory to explain cancer, heart disease, stroke, and other diseases about which science is still largely ignorant. The theory is that people become ill because they do not live right. They do not practise such basic health habits as eating breakfast, exercising regularly, not smoking, and not drinking to excess. In fact, however, there is no conclusive scientific evidence that keeping fit will ward off deadly diseases or add years to one's life. Yet people will continue to believe in "magic" explanations and solutions until science comes in with the cold, hard facts.

*from Doing Well in College,
J. Langan & J. Nadell,
McGraw-Hill, 1980*

A SUMMARY HAS...

- A topic sentence that identifies the article and paraphrases the main idea of the article
- Specific supporting details (may include seamlessly integrated quoted words from the text)
- Clear identification of the author's intended purpose
- No opinion statements / formal writing
- Clear conclusion

Summary Examples:

The article "The Morality of Conviction", by Peter Forsyth, focuses around the need for uncertainty and doubt in the human race to create and sustain a better world. The certainty that what they are doing is right and just is reflected in the violence, crime and torture in Iran, China and Iraq. Every day innocent civilians are killed in cold-blood because the killers are certain that they are doing the right thing. They "allow [their] certainty to steamroll [their] reason and neutralize [their] ability to have second thoughts". Certainty also destroys the ability to understand other people. Doubt is important to how our society functions because, not only are we understanding, but we can also acquire new information and make progress in fields like science and medicine. Doubt is the reason democracies exist because they "assume the best form of government is unknown and likely to remain unknown". Keeping an uncertain frame of mind creates a better world with less crime, more equality, and more understanding.

What do you notice about this summary?

What will you replicate in your next summary?

What would you change?

The purpose of “The Morality of Conviction” is to bring attention to the close-minded world we live in. It highlights the concept of certainty and how “certainty is not a virtue”, but really a pathway to injustice. Galileo was “found guilty of heresy for saying the earth went around the sun”. Galileo was correct, yet he was persecuted because society was certain and had no doubt in their minds that the sun rotated around the earth. The article makes readers realize that doubt, rather than certainty, is the admirable quality in a person because it is doubt that makes one think twice, and doubt that forces society to justify their actions.

What do you notice about this summary?
What will you replicate in your next summary?
What would you change?

The central purpose of “The Morality of Conviction” is to inform society about what causes human acts of cruelty such as heresy and callous forms of capital punishment, and how that sole cause may be diverted in order to alleviate cruelty from the world. The author, Peter Forsyth, forms this possible diversion by first realizing that human cruelty is an indirect result of certainty. He assumes that certainty is inherited through generations in the environment in which the cruel human is raised and accordingly impairs their ability to independently distinguish wrong from right. With this lack of morality comes close-mindedness, causing the individual to believe that only those customs and traditions that have existed in their environment throughout several generations are the correct customs and traditions. For example, Forsythe referred to Galileo’s generation after they rejected Galileo’s new ideas, which went against the customs and traditions followed by that generation. According to Forsyth, however, if this certainty is replaced with doubt, individual’s minds will be open to other customs and traditions as well as the idea of departing from cruelty and contributing to the movement towards utopia.

What do you notice about this summary?
What will you replicate in your next summary?
What would you change?