

Writing Summaries

A summary is a short restatement of someone else's idea. A summary represents the main ideas and opinions, but not the exact words, of the original author. Usually you write a summary in combination with other things. For example, you may summarize and evaluate the author's argument or summarize and respond with your opinion. Evaluating and responding allow you to state your own opinions, but summarizing itself does not.

Understanding the text

When you summarize, or paraphrase, you use your own words. Paraphrasing is more than simple word substitution. If you only substitute word-for-word, you can still be accused of plagiarism (stealing the ideas of another person) if the basic sentence structure remains the same. Avoid plagiarizing by making the effort to mentally process (understand) each point; then, *without looking at the text*, try to explain it in your own words. After you explain it, check the text again to see if you left out anything important. If necessary, revise your explanation until it faithfully reflects the text.

For a longer article, create "chunks" of text and process and paraphrase them separately. You can do this in the text margin or on a T-chart if you prefer. After each chunk, compare your summary with the original to see if it has the same meaning and doesn't leave anything important out. Revise each section if necessary to make it accurately reflect the author's idea for that section.

Boiling down the ideas

A summary should be shorter than the original, "boiled down," or condensed, to essentials. Compare the original chunks, below, from Hu Ying in "China's Unsafe Food Practices" for the *Asia Times Online*, with the summaries that follow:

"Recent food-safety crises have highlighted the challenges that China faces in trying to regulate the diffuse food industry. Provincial and local officials throughout China are facing increasing pressure from Beijing to address the situation, particularly since both President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao publicly pledged to improve food safety and product quality."

Summary:

China has a widespread problem with food safety. China's national leaders are demanding that local officials do more to improve the safety and quality of food products in China.

"Despite speeches, updated laws and ad hoc committee meetings in Beijing, little is being done to change practices and increase safety and quality at the lower levels. If a lasting improvement is going to be achieved, provincial-level officials will have to increase their capacity and willingness to address unsafe production practices."

Summary:

Even though China has updated food safety laws, so far few local leaders are effectively enforcing the new laws. They need to develop better enforcement procedures and follow through with them.

After you have paraphrased and checked each chunk, look at all your paraphrasing together: does it make up one cohesive main idea? Do the parts connect one to the other and make sense? Can you identify the author's thesis? Have you omitted your personal opinions and judgments?

Polishing the summary

Once you feel confident that your summary reflects the original and does not copy from it, add the author and title in a signal phrase and attribute his ideas and conclusions to him:

In the article “China’s Unsafe Food Practices,” reporter Hu Ying says that China has a widespread problem with food safety...”

Ying points out that even though China’s leaders have updated food safety laws....He says they need to develop better enforcement procedures.

Change direct quotes to indirect. Indirect quotes use *that*: *Reporter Hu Ying says that China....* However, only summarize a direct quote if the quote contains essential ideas. Some quotes are intended to illustrate an essential idea already stated elsewhere or just to give a sense of a speaker’s character or personality.

Use present tense verbs for attribution phrases: *Ying explains...He claims...The author points out...*

Use transitions to make it easier to move from chunk to chunk. Transitions signal important relationships between ideas, and without them, a summary can sound choppy: *However, he says those practices will be hard to fix...*

Omit examples. Not all examples use the signal phrase “for example.” Examples can include exact numbers, statistics, case studies, and personal stories. If research is cited, omit the methodology and details and explain what researchers learned or concluded from the study.

If a text is written in first person (from the *I* point of view), summarize in third person (*she* or *he* point of view). For example, the autobiography of Frederick Douglass is a first-person account of his life. In a summary, we would change this to third person: *Douglass says that he finally confronted his abusive supervisor.*

“Translate” figurative language. If the author said managers should “raise the bar,” translate this phrase to more standard, formal language: *managers should demand better behavior, or managers should have higher standards.*

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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