

## 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*