



School of Liberal Arts

University Writing Center

*"Because writers need readers"*

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## *Writing Effective Summaries*

### UNDERSTANDING SUMMARY

Most students write summaries in order to condense information for notes, for reports, or when compiling research information. At the college level, this resource tool becomes important as the notes, reports and research becomes more complex. This handout will present some techniques for effective summarizing—especially for use in essays. You will want, of course, to check with your instructor for any special instructions he or she may have for your assignments.

Statements made in summary tend to be general statements. They include the most important points and only those smaller details needed for recalling or illustrating the information at a later date. Being able to write effective summaries requires you to pick and choose the details that the reader needs to know and leave out that which the reader does not need to know; it also allows you to condense a large amount of information into a small space.

### RECOGNIZING SUMMARY

1. A summary includes the main idea of a selection and its major supporting details.
2. In the case of a paragraph, this means the topic sentence and the details that directly relate to the topic sentence.
3. A summary should only include one statement of the main idea though a textbook author may repeat the idea many times in several ways.
4. A summary can be in your own words, in the words of the author, or a combination of the two. Of course, when you use the author's words, be sure that you have enclosed them in quotation marks.

### SUMMARY STRATEGIES

1. **Read** the passage you will be summarizing carefully. Identify the author's purpose in writing. (This will help you distinguish between more important and less important information.)
2. **Reread** the selection. *Highlight* the key ideas in each paragraph. *Underline* key words and phrases. *Write* in the margins the meaning of the paragraph.
3. **Write a one-sentence overview of the entire passage.** This overview should express the central idea of the passage, as you have determined it from the preceding steps.
4. **Write the first draft of your summary** by combining the overview with one-sentence summaries *plus* significant details from the passage. Eliminate repetition and less important information. Use as few words as possible to convey the main idea.
5. **Check your summary against the original passage** and make whatever adjustments for accuracy and completeness. This step is especially important for avoiding plagiarism.

6. **Revise your summary**, inserting transitional words and phrases where necessary to ensure coherence. Check for style. Avoid a series of short, choppy sentences by combining sentences for a smooth, logical flow of ideas. Check for grammatical correctness, punctuation, and spelling.

### SUMMARY EXAMPLE

#### Original Source:

Public and scientific interest in the question of apes' ability to use language first soared some 15 years ago when Washoe, a chimpanzee raised like a human child by R. Allen Gardner and Beatrice Gardner of the University of Nevada, learned to make hand signs for many words and even seemed to be making short sentences.

Since then, researchers have taught many chimpanzees and a few gorillas and orangutans to "talk" using the sign language of deaf humans, plastic chips or, like Kanzi, keyboard symbols. Washoe, Sarah, a chimpanzee trained by David Premack of the University of Pennsylvania, and Koko, a gorilla trained by the psychologist Francine Patterson, became media stars.

---Eckholm, "Pygmy," p. B7

#### Example Summary of the Source:

Eckholm relates that apes communicating became the subject of interest after the chimpanzee Washoe learned sign language. Later experiments saw other apes communicating using plastic chips or symbols on a keyboard (B7). [*Remember to check your summary against the original and revise if necessary.*]

### DOCUMENTING SUMMARIES IN THE TEXT OF YOUR ESSAY (MLA)

- Typically, you would introduce your summary with a clear signal phrase.
- Be sure to end the summary with the page number in parenthesis.
- If readers will understand from the context that the information comes from an outside source, you may put the author's name with the page number in the parenthesis at the end of the source information.

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