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Writing@CSU Writing Guide Summaries

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Main Page

What you include in a summary depends on how the summary will be used.

Form and Function

As a writer, you decide what goes into your summary based on what the summary needs to do for your readers. If you write a summary to remind yourself about the content of an article you read as part of a large research project, you'll decide about how much detail to include in your summary based on the scope and focus of your research. If you write a summary to include as part of a review of literature, you'll shape the summary based on how much you believe your target readers know about your topic before they begin reading your review of literature. A summary can be as short as a single sentence (a précis or nutshell statement) or as long as 30% of the length of the original article you're summarizing (a detailed summary). Choosing among the options for a summary means thinking about what your readers need.

As an End in Itself

Most of the summaries that we write to remind ourselves of articles we've read serve only that purpose. For a short project or paper that uses only five to ten sources, a nutshell statement or précis for each source may suffice. For a longer project (more sources or extending over a long time), more detailed summaries help writers remember sources accurately.

Teachers may also assign summaries as ends in themselves when the articles are complex and teachers need to be sure that everyone understands the points in the assigned readings. Or teachers may assign summaries to help students practice writing accurately and concisely about the subject matter. Sometimes these summaries serve to introduce students to jargon or concepts particular to that discipline.

Finally, summaries are sometimes written as separate pieces of reference works. Typically called abstracts, these summaries help readers decide if they need/want to read an entire article.

Defining the Précis or Nutshell Statement

Our English word precise comes from the same root as the French word précis, and the nutshell statement or précis is a precise and concise restatement of the original article's main point. Typically only one or two sentences, the précis or nutshell doesn't aim to capture the details, supporting arguments, or types of proof a longer summary does. Instead, the précis boils down an article to its essential main point.

The précis can be a complicated sentence (or two), especially if the main point (otherwise

known as the thesis or claim) of the original piece is complex. And a précis can be extremely difficult to write even though it is short because the writer must take great care to capture the complexity of the original main idea. If you write a précis or nutshell statement to summarize an article, be sure to spend enough time revising to make it both clear and accurate.

Example Article

Computers and Education in America

In the last decade, computers have invaded every aspect of education, from kindergarten through college. The figures show that schools have spent over two billion dollars installing two million new computers. Recently, with the explosive increase of sites on the Internet, computers have taken another dramatic rise. In just five years, the number of Internet hosts has skyrocketed from 2 million to nearly 20 million. It is not uncommon for 6th graders to surf the Net, design their own home pages, and e-mail their friends or strangers they have "met" on the Web. Computer literacy is a reality for many junior high students and most high school students.

In the midst of this technological explosion, we might well stop and ask some key questions. Is computer technology good or bad for education? Are students learning more or less? What, exactly, are they learning? And who stands to benefit from education's current infatuation with computers and the Internet?

In the debate over the virtues of computers in education, the technological optimists think that computers and the Internet are ushering us into the next literacy revolution, a change as profound as Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. In contrast, a much smaller but growing number of critics believe that cyberspace is not the ideal classroom. I agree with the critics. If you consider your own experience, you'll agree that the benefits of computer literacy are at best wildly overrated. At their worst, computers and the Internet pander to the short attention spans and the passive viewing habits of a young television generation.

The technological optimists sing a siren song of an enchanted new land where the educational benefits of computers and the Internet are boundless. First, they boast that children can now access information on every conceivable subject. If little Eva or little Johnny wants to learn about far-away cultures, they can access sites from their own homes that will teach them about the great languages and cultures of the world. Second, these starry-eyed optimists warble about how the Internet has created a truly democratic space, where all children--rich, poor, black, white, and brown--have equal access to information and education. Third, they claim that computers will allow students to have e-mail conversations with experts on any subject around the world. No longer will students be limited by their own classroom, their teacher, or their environment. Distance learning is the wave of the future, and classrooms will become obsolete or at least optional. In the words of John Sculley, former CEO of Apple Computer, the new technologies have created an "avalanche of personal creativity and achievement" and they

have given students the "ability to explore, convey, and create knowledge as never before." Children who used to hate going to school will now love to learn to read and write, to do math and science. They will voluntarily spend hours learning on the Web instead of being bored to death by endless books and stodgy teachers.

Sound too good to be true? Let's examine these claims, one by one. First, promoters of computer learning are endlessly excited about the quantity of information available on the Internet. The reality, however, is quite a different story. If you've worked on the Internet, you know that finding and retrieving information from a Web site can sometimes be tedious and time consuming. And once you find a site, you have no idea whether the information will be valuable. Popular search engines such as Yahoo! are inefficient at finding relevant information, unless you just want to buy a book on Amazon.com or find a street map for Fargo, North Dakota. Information is definitely available on the Web, but the problem is finding relevant, reliable, and non-commercial information.

Next, the optimists claim that the Internet is truly a democratic space with equal access for everyone. Again, the reality falls short. First, access to an Internet provider at home costs over a hundred dollars a month, once you add up service and long distance fees. And then there's the technology barrier--not every person has the skills to navigate the Web in any but the most superficial way. Equal access is still only a theoretical dream, not a current reality.

Finally, computers do allow students to expand their learning beyond the classroom, but the distance learning is not a utopia. Some businesses, such as Hewlett Packard, do have mentoring programs with children in the schools, but those mentoring programs are not available to all students. Distance learning has always been a dream of administrators, eager to figure out a cheaper way to deliver education. They think that little Eva and Johnny are going to learn about Japanese culture or science or algebra in the evening when they could be talking with their friends on the phone or watching television. As education critic Neil Postman points out, these administrators are not imagining a new technology but a new kind of child: "In [the administrator's] vision, there is a confident and typical sense of unreality. Little Eva can't sleep, so she decides to learn a little algebra? Where does little Eva come from? Mars?" Only students from some distant planet would prefer to stick their nose in a computer rather than watch TV or go to school and be with their friends.

In addition to these drawbacks are other problems with computers in education. There is the nasty issue of pornography and the rampant commercialism on the Internet. Schools do not want to have their students spend time buying products or being exposed to pornography or pedophiles. Second, the very attractiveness of most Web sites, with their color graphics and ingenious links to other topics, promotes dabbling and skimming. The word "surfing" is appropriate, because most sites encourage only the most surface exploration of a topic. The Internet thus accentuates what are already bad habits for most students: Their short attention spans, their unwillingness to explore subjects in depth, their poor reading and evaluation skills. Computers also tend to isolate students, to turn them into computer geeks who think cyberspace is actually real. Some students have

found they have a serious and addictive case of "Webaholism," where they spend hours and hours on the computer at the expense of their family and friends. Unfortunately, computers tend to separate, not socialize students. Finally, we need to think about who has the most to gain or lose from computers in the schools. Are administrators getting more students "taught" for less money? Are big companies training a force of computer worker bees to run their businesses? Will corporate CEO's use technology to isolate and control their employees?

In short, the much ballyhooed promise of computers for education has yet to be realized. Education critic Theodore Roszak has a warning for us as we face the brave new world of computer education:

Like all cults, this one has the intention of enlisting mindless allegiance and acquiescence. People who have no clear idea of what they mean by information or why they should want so much of it are nonetheless prepared to believe that we live in an Information Age, which makes every computer around us what the relics of the True Cross were in the Age of Faith: emblems of salvation.

I think if you examine your own experience with computers, you'll agree that the cult of computers is still an empty promise for most students. Computers, the Internet, and the Web will not magically educate students. It still must be done with reading, study, good teaching, and social interaction. Excellence in education can only be achieved the old fashioned way--students must earn it.

--Dudley Erskine Devlin

Example Précis

Devlin believes the benefits of computers in education claimed by the technological optimists are wildly overrated in that equal access on the Internet is not a reality; that finding relevant and reliable information is tedious and time-consuming; that distance learning assumes an unrealistic learner; and that pornography, commercialism, "surfing," and social isolation are not consistent with the goals of education.

As Part of a Response or Position Paper

Many teachers ask students to react in some way to an assigned reading. Typically, such writing assignments include a summary to show that writers understood the original reading. Writers may begin their response or position paper with the summary, or they might work summary into their response. In either case, the summary needs to be clear and distinctive from the response or reaction.

As Part of an Annotated Bibliography

After a citation or bibliography entry, a brief summary constitutes the annotation in an objective annotated bibliography. Typically less detailed and shorter than the detailed

summary that might begin a response paper, a summary as annotation rarely includes any quoted material and instead concentrates on main ideas. The length of the annotation or summary depends on how readers will use the bibliography. If readers are looking for a nutshell statement to help them decide whether to read the article, then the briefest summary will usually suffice. If readers are hoping to learn about the range of articles written about a topic (so that they don't have to read the articles themselves), then annotations usually are longer and include more details from the article.

In a critical annotated bibliography, the annotation includes both the summary as well as one or two lines of analysis/judgment of the published work's worth for a given topic/line of argument.

Related Information: Example Critical Annotated Bibliography Entry

Rosen, Jeffrey. "The end of obscenity." *The New Republic* July 1996: 6-7.

In this article, Rosen talks about the Internet and the overturn of the Communications Decency Act. He believes the Philadelphia judges who overturned this Act deserve credit for enumerating the possibility of one person corrupting cyberspace with obscenities, but they did not take into account that the public are the ones who decipher what is considered to be obscenity. This article appears in a professional publication that targets readers concerned with law and the government. This article is useful to our research because it has to do with language on the Internet and the censorship of it.

Related Information: Example Objective Annotated Bibliography Entry

Jolly, Frank. "Helping Children Learn About TV." *Journal of Communication* 30.3 (1980): 84-93.

In this article, Jolly expresses dismay about the time consumed by television, especially when children watch "inselectively." He does admit that programming brings language into the home and does affect the growing child in positive ways as far as language is concerned. Jolly includes statistics and graphs, including a bar graph indicating the time spent watching TV by children at different socio-economic levels. The article appears in a professional journal and is written for an audience of teachers.

As Part of a Larger Paper

Summaries of various sorts fit into larger papers. We often see summaries as part of a review of literature that sets the context for the writer's research or position in a controversy. Sometimes writers use summaries of polarized arguments to show the range of points of view in a dispute. Even more often, summaries are frequently used as "proof" for an argument or your position, to explain a given idea or fact, or to show where the information you are using came from. This is why many writers compose summaries frequently as they are researching for a larger essay. Writing a complete summary of each essay/book you cover in your research is a good time-saver because you can simply

"paste" the summary at an appropriate point in your draft or refer to it for a central quote or idea.

When you're using summaries for one of these purposes, be sure to think about what your readers already know about the topic. If your readers know relatively little on your topic, your summaries will almost certainly be longer and give readers more background information. If you believe that your readers know a good deal about your topic, you can probably set the context or prove your point with a précis or brief summary.

Example of Summary to Set Context in a Review of Literature

(Note how the writer uses the source "summary" to set up a theoretical explanation of reading and then extends that definition to her argument about hypertext.)

The prior knowledge readers have about reading can be called reading schemata. David Rumelhart (1980) defines schemata as "the building blocks of cognition" that are "employed in the process of interpreting sensory data (both linguistic and nonlinguistic), in retrieving information from memory, in organizing actions, in determining goals and subgoals, in allocating resources, and generally in guiding the flow of processing in the system" (p. 33-34). If reading conventions are schematic, then a hypertext reader, even one with little experience reading from a computer screen, brings prior knowledge about reading paper texts to the task of reading hypertexts. This prior knowledge can be adapted to the development of hypertext-reading schemata. Rumelhart calls the evolution of schema "tuning" (p. 53). If we watch, analyze, and learn how readers read hypertexts, then we may be able to facilitate an evolution of paper text reading schemata to hypertext reading schemata.

Rumelhart says that one kind of "tuning" schemata amounts to "replacing a constant portion of a schema with a variable one--that is, adding a new variable to a schema" (p. 53). One constant portion of a paper text navigation schema, for example, is that texts are fixed in a linear structure. When a reader sees sentences and paragraphs on a computer screen that look like text in a paper document, the reader may instantiate a linear text navigation schema. But when the reader realizes that there are no page numbers, and no pages as the reader knows them, then the constant, that documents are made up of pages in a linear sequence, is replaced with a variable that sentences and paragraphs can appear like they do on pages, but not necessarily on paper. If the reader "tunes" this portion of the linear text navigation schema, then the reader becomes open to developing hypertext navigation schemata.

Rumelhart, D.E. (1980). Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. In R. J. Spiro, B. C. Bruce, and W. F. Brewer (Eds.), *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension* (pp. 38-58). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Concise Statement of the Main Idea

Authors sometimes state their main idea in a thesis that will jump out at readers, but not always. And even those authors who seem to state a main point early in an article may refine that main idea by the end of the article. Sometimes, authors make several points in one text, and they expect readers to understand how the points relate to each other. So deciding on the main point of an essay can be difficult, especially when the author doesn't make the thesis stand out clearly. Looking for the main point many times means putting sub-points together on your own and/or summarizing information in a different order than it is presented in the original article. The key is to use your own words to generalize about the entire article, rather than following the organization and/or wording exactly as the author has described it.

Citing the Author and Title

A summary should clearly note that the information being conveyed is not your own. To be clear about who originally wrote the material, always begin your summary with the author's name and the title of the piece (i.e., book, article, Web page, etc.). You can introduce the author and title in any of several ways:

According to author Mick Jagger in "Why My Lips are so Big," . . . (go on to main point).

Mick Jagger, famous lead singer for the Rolling Stones, in "Why My Lips are so Big" describes . . . (go on to main point).

An unfortunate childhood disease is the reason Mick Jagger provides for his readers in an article whose title reflects the question often asked of Jagger, "Why My Lips are so Big."

Even if you don't know the author, be sure to note the title at the beginning of your summary.

Details and Quotations

Once you have determined the main point and presented it for your reader, you need to note major supporting points if the author includes those. If not, look instead at the supporting detail that demonstrates to your reader how the original author makes his/her point. You do not need to summarize all the information an author provides; just show the key examples or details or outline the kinds of evidence the author uses. In other words, give your reader enough detail to illustrate the types of proof the author uses in the original article.

Documenting Sources

Even if your only purpose is to summarize a short article, you need to give your readers publication or copyright information about that article. Typically, any piece of writing that refers to another publication includes a "Works Cited" page or a "Bibliography."

Quotations and/or paraphrases also need to be cited through footnotes, endnotes, or

in-text documentation. The proper way to cite this information differs according to your audience.

Note: If you're writing a stand-alone summary of an essay from one of your textbooks, check with your teacher about whether you need to turn in a separate "Works Cited" page. Teachers will sometimes forego this formality when you're citing only a single source that is known to the whole class.

Style and Tone

Students often mistakenly assume that the style of a summary is unimportant. If the summary covers the main points, they think, then the summary is adequate. In fact, style and tone count heavily in summary. Most important, readers who look at a summary for the sole purpose of getting a quick glimpse of the article don't want to read extra words and phrases that don't further the meaning. So brevity counts! Moreover, readers want to be able to count on the summary for an accurate representation of the original piece. If the writer allows personal opinion to color word choice, then the tone of the summary can mislead readers.

Objectivity

Summaries should not include the opinion of the summary writer at all, not even in the smallest phrases or through biased word choices. Because we often use value-laden words without realizing it, we can easily misrepresent an author's view or color it with our own opinions. Especially when editing, watch for any value-laden words like these:

positive	negative
good	bad
strong	weak
conservative	liberal
hard	difficult
easy	funny
interesting	well-supported

Compare the two student-written examples closely to see how easily opinion can slip through in a seemingly straightforward summary sentence.

Related Information: Example Summaries

Non-objective summary: "*Not surprisingly*, the students did not like the test, for it showed *their ignorance* in a broad spectrum of topics.

Objective summary: The article reveals his opinion that students do not ask pertinent questions in an attempt to keep their ignorance concealed.

Both writers are summarizing the opinion of the author, but the first example does not attribute the thought to the author of the article. The highlighted sections allow the reader to infer that it is the summary writer's opinion that the students were ignorant and that the summary writer found this to be no surprise.

Using Author Tags

Even after you note the author and title at the beginning of your summary, readers can sometimes lose track of how much of your paper summarizes an article. When this happens, readers don't see the end of your summary and the beginning of your reaction or opinion. The best way to avoid this problem in an extended summary (or even one that includes only four to five sentences) is to repeat the author's name or appropriate pronouns. When you repeat the name, use verbs that underscore the author's purpose in writing the original article.

For example, Jaime O'Neill not only describes his classroom experiment in "No Allusions in the Classroom," but he also argues for "common knowledge." Look at the example summary again to see how many ways this student refers to O'Neill and describes O'Neill's writing.

Related Information: Example Summary

Note: The author tags are underlined

Author Jaime O'Neill's article, "No Allusions in the Classroom," emphasizes the communication problem between teachers and students due to the students' lack of basic knowledge. The author supports this assertion by using a combination of personal experience, evidence obtained from recent polls, other professors' opinions, and the results of an experiment he conducted in his own classroom. The experiment O'Neill conducted was an ungraded eighty-six question "general knowledge" test issued to students on the first day of classes. On this test, "most students answered incorrectly far more often than they answered correctly." Incorrect answers included fallacies such as: "Darwin invented gravity" and "Leningrad was in Jamaica." Compounding the problem, students don't ask questions. This means that their teachers assume they know things that they do not. O'Neill shows the scope of this problem by showing that, according to their teachers, this seems to be a typical problem across the United States. O'Neill feels that common knowledge in a society is essential to communicate. Without this common knowledge, learning is made much more difficult because teacher and student do not have a common body of knowledge from which to draw. The author shows the deterioration of common knowledge through poll results, personal experience, other teachers' opinions, and his own experiment's results.

Jaime O'Neill, No Allusions in the Classroom, *Newsweek*, September 23, 1985.

Putting it All Together

Look at one more sample of a stand-alone detailed summary assigned to give students practice in the summary skills noted here as Key Issues. Look for a concise statement of the main idea, citation of the author and title, author tags throughout the summary, details and quotations to illustrate types of proof, and the style and tone. The sample is annotated with instructor's comments.

Example Summary

Note: Comments are accessible at the bottom of the page.

John (Fire) Lame Deer, Richard Erdoes
Summary of "Talking to the Owls and Butterflies"

John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes once had a discussion *Comment 1 about how they believed white men have made it difficult for themselves and Indians to "experience nature in the good way by being part of it" by creating a materialistic and unnatural society and way of life, but not necessarily without final hope. *Comment 2 Richard Erdoes wrote about their conversation in "Talking to the Owls and Butterflies," a request for the modern people of the world to sit down like the stones and trees, and "think and feel like animals."

John (Fire) Lame Deer believes that men have not only changed animals' living habits and attitudes, but they have also changed themselves by living such an organized life of career and habits, so that they are now trapped in the materialistic world that they put themselves in. "Watch the ashes, don't smoke, you'll stain the curtains. Watch the goldfish bowl, don't breath on the parakeet, don't lean your head against the wallpaper; your hair might be greasy. Don't spill liquor on the table; it has a delicate finish." *Comment 3 John (Fire) Lame Deer tells us of a reservation joke. "What is cultural deprivation? Answer: Being an upper-middle-class white kid living in a split level suburban home with a color TV." Americans have learned to sanitize everything, so that all nature has been taken out of it. This includes humans, food, and life. White men got rid of the man and woman smells, using perfumes and deodorant. White men have made food artificial, the taste and color. "Raw liver, raw kidney--that's what we old fashioned full bloods like to get our teeth into." Changing the food in this way results in bad nutrition; the Indians didn't need the vitamins and pills. He believes that white men do not enjoy the life in the open, the way he feels it should be. He gives us a vision in the beginning of the critique of how he believes life is supposed to be experienced. Let's have the grass for a mattress, experiencing it's sharpness and softness." "Talking to the Owls and Butterflies" speaks of how all life is sacred. "Men are spreading death" living in this world of materialistic, artificial trade. John *Comment 4 (Fire) Lame Deer says that white men do not want to experience the world, they don't want to hear it, smell it, taste it, feel it. He says that men are scared of the world they have created. The Indians of long ago didn't have heart trouble or cancer. All the illnesses they had, the medicine men had

a cure for, but the white men destroyed their sweat lodges along with the cures. The men of the planet should not take it for granted, literally taking and not giving; selecting animals to die depending on the income they bring. The Indians use to apologize, explain, and pray to the spirits of the animals they killed. He wants modern men to experience nature, the earth, the weather, living beings and spirits the way that he and his people do.

John (Fire) Lame Deer feels that white men will soon come around, that they are at the end of their vicious materialistic and industrial circle. *Comment 5 Everything as it is now will end and men will soon live with the earth as Lame Deer illustrates. "The day is coming when nature will stop the electricity....There is a Light Man coming, to bring new light." Men will learn about the weather and about nature when they leave their houses and offices. Life will slow down, no more heart problems, just like the old Indians. Lame Deer believes men are moving back towards the natural part of life, living life as the Indians did. He believes that the original spirit and wisdom lies within each man, just like they see it in the animals of the wild. "Sometimes I feel like the first being in one of our Indian legends. This was a giant made of earth, water, the moon and the winds. He had timber for hair, a whole forest for trees. He had a huge lake in his stomach and a waterfall in his crotch." Each man is part of nature, is able to feel and live with nature, only if they let themselves be.

Bibliography

Lame Deer, J., & Erdoes, R. (1998). "Talking to the Owls and Butterflies." In T. H. Crusius and C. E. Channell, *The Aims of Argument: A Rhetoric and Reader*, 2e; pp. 209-215. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

Related Information: Comment 1

A good summary always includes the title and author. For this essay that involves a unique collaboration, the student has found a graceful way to explain that Lame Deer talked to Richard Erdoes who then wrote and edited the essay.

Related Information: Comment 2

This writer finds a successful way to capture the sense of the overall argument in the introduction to the rest of the summary.

Related Information: Comment 3

In an essay so dominated by details, each summary writer will choose those that best capture the "flavor" of the original. In this sample, the writer chooses to quote some details and paraphrase others but includes many of the details that make the original essay interesting to read.

Related Information: Comment 4

Notice that this writer uses Lame Deer's name as well as "he" and "his" as author tags.

Many of the verbs the writer uses with his author tags reinforce the emotional element of Lame Deer's position.

Related Information: Comment 5

This writer uses a paragraph break in the summary to indicate the two main chunks of the original essay.

Processes for Standard Summaries

The descriptions that follow focus either primarily on reading or writing, although they both make reference to each other. Choose the one that best represents your own preferred way of writing: do you begin with reading and spend a lot of time with sources? If so, choose source analysis.

Or, do you begin writing as soon as possible, consistently revising? If so, choose writing.

Process For Finding Main Point

Deciding on the main point of an essay can be difficult, since authors frequently make several points in one text. While all the points made might be important to demonstrate why the author believes what he does, they can usually be subsumed into a more general point that the entire article makes. Looking for this more general point many times means putting sub-points together on your own and/or summarizing information in a different order than it is presented in the original article. The steps here help ensure that you find the main point rather than only the first point that the author makes.

Related Information: Steps For Finding Main Point

Read the article through once.

Read again, listing all points made.

Look over the list for a more general purpose these points serve.

Write **one** sentence that summarizes this general purpose. (i.e., the "why anyone wrote this thing to begin with" line).

Check that purpose for accuracy by re-reading the article.

Revise summary statement accordingly.

Process For Summarizing Support

Once you have your one-sentence summary of the overall purpose and content of the article, it's time to concentrate on demonstrating to the reader the types of support and proof the author uses to make his/her point. You may be able to use your original notes for this information, but it's frequently useful to return to the text again with a different focus in mind. Your question this time is: how does she/he demonstrate his/her point?

Related Information: Steps For Summarizing Support

Read through the article again, listing every example, quote, or argument the author uses.

Look through your list for commonalities or categories of proof. For example, does the author use several different types of statistical analyses or does she rely on other published sources?

Write a summary sentence that introduces all the different categories of proof.

Provide one or two representative examples from your list. Choose examples that are either the most common or the most persuasive.

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