

Guidelines for writing a summary

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Purpose of a summary: to present, in a few pages (4 or 5 typed pages unless otherwise instructed), the main ideas and arguments presented in an article, book or chapter of a book. The purpose of a summary is not to evaluate or to criticize or add examples or material to the work summarized --- don't praise, don't condemn, don't lose your focus on what the author is saying.

Basic guidelines:

You should be aware that it is very easy to write a really bad summary. If you start by opening the article or book to be summarized, and start typing your summary while reading it for the first time, you will be sure to write a bad summary. You will get lost in detail at the beginning of your summary, because you began without knowing where you were going. You will all too likely run out of space before getting to some of your author's main points.

First, read the work to be summarized. Then read it again, making sure you understand not just the individual sentences, but the connections between them. On your second reading, you should jot down brief notes listing the main points the author is making. Keep your notes brief -- if you have more than three or four points, you are almost certainly including relatively minor points.

If the author is kind, the first or the last paragraphs of the work may state the major points he is making. If the author is not, it is your job to find them. Often, especially in news articles or popular magazines, a story is told at the beginning illustrating the main point. The story does not belong in the summary, the main point does.

In academic writing, the author is likely not only to present evidence in favor of his own view, but to argue against opposing views. Be very careful to distinguish the passages in which the author states the views of his opponents from his own views.

Next, begin writing. The summary should begin with the author and title of the work summarized, along with bibliographic information. You can usually keep this very limited:

Paul Krugman, "Ricardo's Difficult Idea."
In Geraint Parry, Hillel Steiner and Gary Cook (eds), *Freedom and Trade*, volume II:
The Economics and Politics of International Trade, pages 22-36. Routledge, 1998,
Accessed from:
http://www.uni-konstanz.de/FuF/wiwi/vwl/HPGrieben/download/Krugman_Ricardo's.pdf

Sometimes a bit more is needed if you are focusing your attention on part of a work.

Adam Smith's Critique of Mercantilism in Book IV of the *Wealth of Nations* (1776).
Summary of Book IV, Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 8.
Accessed from <http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/SmithWNtoc.html>

Think carefully about your opening paragraph. It should be a summary of your summary, mentioning all the points which will be developed later on. See my example on the next page.

Be very careful in your writing not to follow the text so closely that you are paraphrasing the words of the author. You may be on the edge of plagiarism. If you are uncertain of exactly what plagiarism is, see the link on my web page to the Georgetown University guidelines, which I will use in evaluating cases of plagiarism.

Begin with the central ideas of the article or book, and state them as clearly as you can. I have sometimes asked students to summarize Adam Smith's critique of mercantilism. Your opening paragraph might read something like this:

"Adam Smith, in Book IV of the *Wealth of Nations*, argued that the mercantilist system led to misguided policies which hindered economic growth. According to Smith, the mercantilists were mistaken in equating gold and silver with wealth. Their policies encouraged the misallocation of resources -- capital and labor were directed into manufacturing and foreign trade rather than the more profitable development of agriculture and the more profitable home trade. Foreign trade can contribute to economic growth as long as it grows naturally out of a country's advantages. It will not if it is hindered by excessive regulations or tariffs. Smith was especially critical of policies that created monopolies, for they neglected his basic rule that the interest of the consumer rather than that of the producer was the goal of economic activity."

This opening paragraph should serve as a good outline for later pages, which tell you

- a. what exactly the mercantilists believed and why it was mistaken.
- b. how their policies led to misallocation of resources, and led countries to neglect more profitable opportunities.
- c. how Smith determines the natural advantages of countries
- d. why Smith objected to tariffs generally, and what exceptions he made to the rule.
- e. exactly how mercantilists regarded production rather than consumption as the goal of the economy.

Note that once you have that outline, the rest of the summary will fall into place quickly. You will know that you cannot spend more than a page on any of the topics, so you will have to limit the detail you put under any one point. You cannot, for example, quote Locke on money at length (as Smith does) or talk about the details of the wine trade with Portugal or take up too much space discussing the pros and cons of the Navigation Acts. Each heading has room for one (not too long) quotation from Smith making the point, maybe one of Smith's examples, and perhaps a brief statement of an argument Smith makes against an opponent.

Further useful guides to writing a summary:

Columbia University Writing Center:

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ssw/write/handouts/summary.html>

Drew University, Susan Jameison:

<http://users.drew.edu/~sjamieson/Summary.html>

Brief summary of this guide to writing a summary:

- Present the author's main ideas and supporting arguments: not your opinions or examples
- Present the author's main ideas briefly but substantively in the first paragraph.
- Organize the rest of the paper around those ideas. Don't stray into excessive detail.
- Don't quote extensively (don't use paragraph-long indented quotes).
- Don't paraphrase too closely; a sentence of yours should cover a paragraph of the author's as a general rule. (But please don't think you have to have a sentence for every paragraph the author wrote -- omit long examples and some supporting arguments).
- Revise your summary. Check that your quotations are properly referenced and that your paraphrases don't violate plagiarism guidelines. Make sure the main points are made in the first paragraph of the summary and developed logically in the rest of your paper.

