

# How to Write Formal Summaries

- ❖ Read the selection carefully paying attention to the key words, phrases, and concepts.
- ❖ Look for all the main ideas and supporting information included in the original work.
- ❖ As you read, mark up the text underlining or notating as little as possible for the purpose of remembering as much as possible.
- ❖ Make sure you understand what the overall purpose/meaning of the text is before you begin to write.
- ❖ Organize the important information in a pre-writing format before writing the summary.
- ❖ Your summary must not include information or have judgments that are not in the text.
- ❖ Do not interpret or add details not found in the original text.
- ❖ When you write your summary, make sure you condense the text (about 1/3 to 1/4 the length of the original text).
- ❖ This must be written in third person only!
- ❖ Write a summary using only the facts and details from the original text:
  - The topic sentence should be a clear statement of the main idea of the original selection.
  - Add essential facts and details such as names, explanations, descriptions, dates, or places.
  - State each key point in ONE clear sentence.
  - Arrange ideas in the most logical order following the order of the original text.
  - End your summary with a concluding sentence that ties the ideas together.

## Criteria for Formal Summaries

A good summary should condense the original text (i.e., it should be shorter). How short is short enough? It should be long enough to include the most important information (see below). A rough rule of thumb for passages of 1 - 3 pages is that a summary should be about 1/3 to 1/4 the length of the original text. For some texts, the appropriate length of a summary depends on why it is being written (i.e., what it will be used for), as well as on the length of the original text.

A good summary should include only the most important information. But what information is the most important? In any passage, some information is going to be more important than other information. When trying to determine which information to include, the summary writer might ask "Is this piece of information necessary for the summary reader to know what the original passage was about?"

A good summary should reflect only what is in the passage. A summary comes directly from the text; it reflects only the point of view and information from the text and does not go beyond the text. For example, what you write in your summary should not include other information you know about the topic nor should it include your opinions about the information in the passage.

A good summary should be written in your own words. This means that the summary is not copied directly from the text. The same ideas are conveyed, but you have translated these into your own way of saying them. This often results in the text being condensed, as well.

A good summary should be well written. This means, very simply, that the summary follows the rules of good writing (e.g., spelling, word usage, punctuation, sentence construction, and organization).

## Summary Writing Conventions

Avoid questions. Most of the time using questions in a summary will be less direct and less efficient than some other way of presenting the information. Questions tend to make an idea longer, rather than shorter, and they often mean the summary reader has to figure out what was in the original text. There will be exceptions, but you have to ask yourself how well questions communicate the information from the passage.

Avoid the first person (e.g., the word I) in your summary. Narrative prose (a story) is best summarized when the summary is written in the third person. Even if a narrative is written in the first person, the summary should be written in the third person. The experiences of the characters in the story are not your *experiences* and should not be presented as though they were.

Avoid dialogue. Dialogue is usually not an effective way to summarize a narrative. There may be times when you cannot avoid using dialogue or when it is the best way to convey the contents of the passage. But, in general, it should be avoided.

Begin with information from the passage, *not* with an introductory statement such as "This passage is about" or "What I read in the passage was."

*Sacramento County Office of Education Capital Region Professional Development Center*

# Summary Writing Checklist

## Quick Check for the writer

### Did you...

- \_\_\_\_\_ Read carefully to understand the main ideas of the passage?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Include all the main points or story elements from the original text?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Select the most important details to support the main idea?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Combine ideas that belong together and collapse lists into larger categories by generalizing?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Paraphrase or write the ideas that you included?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make sure you are telling what happened in the story and not writing from your own point of view or as if you were one of the characters?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Avoid inserting any information that was not in the original passage?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Avoid asking questions, using the first person "I", or using dialogue?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Arrange your ideas in the most logical order?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Use a concluding or ending sentence that ties your points together?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make your summary about the right length for summary purposes?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Edit for correct punctuation, capitalization and spelling?

## Passage Breakdown

**Topic:**

**Essential Info:**

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<b>Main Points:</b>	<b>Details/Support:</b>
1.	a. b. c.
2.	a. b. c.
3.	a. b. c.