

Writing a Summary

A summary identifies the most important information in an author's work and presents it in a manner that is shorter and more concise than the original. It focuses on what the author intended to be the main point, not what you as a reader see as significant about the work.

Read!

The first step toward writing a summary is reading the source material with empathy for what the author is trying to say. Scan the work for section or chapter headings, the thesis statement, topic sentences, and concluding remarks to get an idea of the work and what you know about the topic, then just read the piece without taking notes. Instead, as you read for meaning the first time or in a second reading, look for who the author is (or is pretending to be) and consider the social or professional context the work was written in and the assumptions the author seems to have made about the audience based on the content of the work. For example, in reading Dr. Martin Luther King's "A Letter from Birmingham Jail," one needs to have an understanding of its context in the 1960s and the ministers Dr. King is responding to. You may need to look up outside information to understand historical references or technical terms; this is not unusual, and teachers often expect college students to do additional reading and research without it being openly assigned.

Pre-Write and Read Again

After your first careful reading, set the work aside and write your own sentence stating the main point of the piece. Then find the author's thesis statement and compare it to the sentence you wrote—they should be very similar. Make sure your sentence is about the central idea of the piece and not a secondary point. A central idea is an author's focus from beginning to end: it is explored from different angles, and with different specific examples, but returns again and again throughout the piece.

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One way to determine what is more or less important in a piece is to imagine the effect of taking it out. If altering or removing a word or sentence changes the whole work, then that is probably key to the thesis! If, however, a part could be left out and the overall work would be unchanged, then that is a minor point that can be omitted from a summary. The relationships between the main points of the work are also significant. As you re-read the piece, underline topic sentences, key phrases, and the transitional elements between paragraphs to identify how the author organizes the main ideas.

Start Drafting

When you have restated the author's thesis in your own words and found the essential ideas and the ways they relate to each other, start drafting your summary. Begin by stating the name(s) of the author(s), the title of the work being summarized, and the thesis or central idea of the work. Use third-person point of view and present-tense verbs. Moreover, keep the author's argument strategy alive as you present your summary. Do not merely list: e.g., "First the author says . . . , then the author states that . . . , next she writes. . . ." Instead, convey the dynamic relationships between the ideas in the piece with expressive phrases. Even if you're writing an academic paper, if an author is angry about a situation or excited, show it. For example, "The author argues primarily for the support of the minority rebels' cause, pointing out that . . . While at the same time, the author makes it clear that the rebels' violent strategy has alienated their former allies and undermined their credibility." Make sure the ideas stated are clearly the author's and not your own, and except for unique terms coined by the author or short vivid phrases, avoid quoting from the text.

Revision

Once you've finished your draft, revise for accuracy and concision. Make sure you leave out your opinions; a summary reports another's ideas rather than evaluates them. Look for anything that departs from the author's main point or leaves an important point unsaid. See also whether the draft summary is more than one-fourth to one-third of the length of the source material. If it is too long, but the ideas are already narrowed down to the most essential, try employing what the OWL at Purdue calls the "paramedic method" of revision to slim down sentences to their most basic forms:

1. Circle the prepositions (of, in, about, for, onto, into, etc.).

2. Draw a box around the "is/are/were, etc." verb forms.
3. Ask, "Where's the action?"
4. Change the "action" into a simple verb.
5. Move the doer into the subject position (the "Who" of "Who is kicking whom").
6. Eliminate any unnecessary slow wind-ups.
7. Eliminate any redundancies.

Wordy example: In this paper, I am going to discuss many aspects of this current problem which is troubling to many people who are involved in this endeavor and need the public to become aware of their problem and try to solve it. (41 words)

Revised: Many people need the public's help to solve this problem. (10 words)

Works Consulted

Brizee, H. Allen. "Paramedic Method: A Lesson in Writing Concisely." *The OWL at Purdue*, Purdue University, 28 Sept. 2007.

Hacker, Diana. "Summarize to Demonstrate Your Understanding." *A Writer's Reference*, 6th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008, pp. 62-63.

"Process for Writing a Summary." *LEO: Literacy Education Online*, St. Cloud University, 28 Sept. 1997.

The Turnip

There were two brothers who were both soldiers; the one was rich and the other poor. The poor man thought he would try to better himself; so, pulling off his red coat, he became a gardener, and dug his ground well, and sowed turnips.

When the seed came up, there was one plant bigger than all the rest; and it kept getting larger and larger, and seemed as if it would never cease growing; so that it might have been called the prince of turnips for there never was such a one seen before, and never will again. At last it was so big that it filled a cart, and two oxen could hardly draw it; and the gardener knew not what in the world to do with it, nor whether it would be a blessing or a curse to him. One day he said to himself, 'What shall I do with it? If I sell it, it will bring no more than another; and for eating, the little turnips are better than this; the best thing perhaps is to carry it and give it to the king as a mark of respect.'

Then he yoked his oxen, and drew the turnip to the court, and gave it to the king. 'What a wonderful thing!' said the king; 'I have seen many strange things, but such a monster as this I never saw. Where did you get the seed? Or is it only your good luck? If so, you are a true child of fortune.' 'Ah, no!' answered the gardener, 'I am no child of fortune; I am a poor soldier, who never could get enough to live upon; so I laid aside my red coat, and set to work, tilling the ground. I have a brother, who is rich, and your majesty knows him well, and all the world knows him; but because I am poor, everybody forgets me.'

The king then took pity on him, and said, 'You shall be poor no longer. I will give you so much that you shall be even richer than your brother.' Then he gave him gold and lands and flocks, and made him so rich that his brother's fortune could not at all be compared with his.

When the brother heard of all this, and how a turnip had made the gardener so rich, he envied him sorely, and bethought himself how he could contrive to get the same good fortune for himself. However, he determined to manage more cleverly than his brother, and got together a rich present of gold and fine horses for the king; and thought he must have a much larger gift in return; for if his brother had received so much for only a turnip, what must his present be worth? [sic—should be *worth*]

The king took the gift very graciously, and said he knew not what to give in return more valuable and wonderful than the great turnip; so the soldier was forced to put it into a cart, and drag it home with him. When he reached home, he knew not upon whom to vent his rage and spite; and at length wicked thoughts came into his head, and he resolved to kill his brother.

So he hired some villains to murder him; and having shown them where to lie in ambush, he went to his brother, and said, 'Dear brother, I have found a hidden treasure; let us go and dig it up, and share it between us.' The other had no suspicions of his roguery: so they went out together, and as they were travelling along, the murderers rushed out upon him, bound him, and were going to hang him on a tree.

But whilst they were getting all ready, they heard the trampling of a horse at a distance, which so frightened them that they pushed their prisoner neck and shoulders together into a sack, and swung him up by a cord to the tree, where they left him dangling, and ran away. Meantime he worked and worked away, till he made a hole large enough to put out his head.

When the horseman came up, he proved to be a student, a merry fellow, who was journeying along on his nag, and singing as he went. As soon as the man in the sack saw him passing under the tree, he cried out, 'Good morning! Good morning to thee, my friend!' The student looked about everywhere; and seeing no one, and not knowing where the voice came from, cried out, 'Who calls me?'

Then the man in the tree answered, 'Lift up thine eyes, for behold here I sit in the sack of wisdom; here have I, in a short time, learned great and wondrous things. Compared to this seat, all the learning of the schools is as empty air. A little longer, and I shall know all that man can know, and shall come forth wiser than the wisest of mankind. Here I discern the signs and motions of the heavens and the stars; the laws that control the winds; the number of the sands on the seashore; the healing of the sick; the virtues of all simples, of birds, and of precious stones. Wert thou but once here, my friend, though wouldst feel and own the power of knowledge.'

The student listened to all this and wondered much; at last he said, 'Blessed be the day and hour when I found you; cannot you contrive to let me into the sack for a little while?' Then the other answered, as if very unwillingly, 'A little space I may allow thee to sit here, if thou wilt reward me well and entreat me kindly; but thou must tarry yet an hour below, till I have learnt some little matters that are yet unknown to me.'

So the student sat himself down and waited a while; but the time hung heavy upon him, and he begged earnestly that he might ascend forthwith, for his thirst for knowledge was great. Then the other pretended to give way, and said, 'Thou must let the sack of wisdom descend, by untying yonder cord, and then thou shalt enter.' So the student let him down, opened the sack, and set him free. 'Now then,' cried he, 'let me ascend quickly.' As he began to put himself into the sack heels first, 'Wait a while,' said the gardener, 'that is not the way.' Then he pushed him

in head first, tied up the sack, and soon swung up the searcher after wisdom dangling in the air. 'How is it with thee, friend?' said he, 'Dost thou not feel that wisdom comes unto thee? Rest there in peace, till thou art a wiser man than thou wert.'

So saying, he trotted off on the student's nag, and left the poor fellow to gather wisdom till somebody should come and let him down. [1,155 words]

Grimm Brothers. "The Turnip." *Fairy Tales*, translated by Edgar Taylor and Edgar Taylor and Marian Edwardes, *Authorama: Public Domain Books*, Philip Lensen, www.authorama.com/grimms-fairy-tales-41.html.

Example Summary

In the Grimms' fairy tale "The Turnip," a poor gardener uses self-pity and persuasion to improve his situation and make a rube out of others. The tale begins with soldier brothers; one is poor and the other is rich. The poor brother isn't making enough money, so he quits the military to grow turnips. One of the turnips grows extremely large, so much so that the poor gardener is in a quandary what to do with it.

He decides the only course of action is to give the turnip to the king "as a mark of respect." The king is thrilled to receive such "a wonderful thing" and asks how it came to exist. The poor man replies that he "set to work tilling the ground" because of his poverty, but he adds, "I have a brother, who is rich, and your majesty knows him well, and all the world knows him; but because I am poor, everybody forgets me."

The king is moved to give him so much "gold and lands and flocks" that his wealth surpasses his brother's. The rich brother, learning all this, gets jealous and tries to show up his brother with a more expensive gift to the king. He expects to get more than his brother in return, but the king has nothing better than to give him the giant turnip, instead.

Furious, the jealous brother hires assassins. He tricks his trusting brother into going to a meeting place where the killers attack. However, they are scared off by the sound of approaching hooves and leave the poor man hanging upside down in a sack.

He gets his head out of the bag and calls out to a young "student" who listens as the gardener tells him he is in a "sack of wisdom" and entices the young man with a poetic list of all the amazing things he has supposedly learned.

The student is so intrigued that he begs to get into the bag. Once on the ground, the gardener shoves him headfirst into the sack, ties him up in the air, asks if he feels wiser now, and rides off on the boy's horse. (361 words)