

LUC WRITING CENTER – “WRITING A SUMMARY”

Summarizing texts is a common task in college courses. The purpose of a summary is to **distill** a source text down to its **essential components**. Writing a summary is an analytical task insofar as it involves selecting certain pieces of information judged to be vital to the source text and excluding other pieces of information as less important. Despite this implicit argumentative component, summaries aspire to be objective and descriptive by communicating the source text’s content as accurately as possible.

Types of Summary:

There are many types of summary writing. You may have to write stand-alone summary essays, but you will also need to summarize texts in longer assignments, such as research papers, that are fundamentally argumentative in nature. Three of the most common types of summary are listed below.

- **In-text Summary:** When you introduce a secondary source in a research paper, you should preface your engagement with it with a brief summary of the source’s content. An in-text summary of a secondary source will generally name the author and the text before providing a brief description of the source’s argument and main points. Such a summary might be used to introduce a quote from the source or to orient your reader towards another important perspective on your topic.
- **Annotated Bibliography:** Annotated bibliographies are documents in which one compiles and briefly summarizes a number of sources dealing with a single topic. Annotated bibliographies are often used in the preliminary stages of writing a research paper. The summary you include in an annotated bibliography should generally be about a paragraph long and include the source text’s overall argument, main points, and key terms (see our handout on annotated bibliographies for more details).
- **Summary Assignment:** Classes in a variety of disciplines assign short summary assignments that test students’ comprehension of assigned readings. The length of the summary is important in determining how to prioritize the information in the source text. In a one-page summary, you should typically aim to describe the source text’s overall argument and its key points and terms.

How to Write a Summary:

To write an effective summary, you first must identify the essential components of your source text. Start by articulating for yourself, in a single sentence, what the source text’s overall argument is. After identifying the source text’s general argument or claim, try to pick out the main points or pieces of evidence it uses to support that argument. A short, in-text summary might just mention the source text’s overall argument, while a one-page summary essay might discuss the argument and two or three main points in some detail. The way you prioritize the information in your source text will, again, depend on the length and type of summary you are writing.

Taking careful **notes** can be a valuable aid to writing a summary. If you **annotate** your source text as you read it – underlining or highlighting important passages, or perhaps jotting down notes on a separate sheet of paper – then much of the work of summary writing will

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already be completed by the time you finish reading the source text. You will have identified the main components and isolated them out from the rest of the text, and you will be ready to synthesize them into a summary.

Students often wonder whether or not it is appropriate to include **quotations** in summaries. This depends on several factors, including the type and length of the summary you’re writing and the expectations of your professor. A common use of brief in-text summaries is to introduce a source text and preface a quotation from that source. Annotated bibliographies can potentially include quotations, but if you’re turning in an annotated bibliography as an assignment, you should be aware of your professor’s expectations. Professors tend to be divided over the use of quotes in summary assignments. Some UCWR 110 professors, for instance, will require students to include quotes in their summaries, while others will explicitly forbid it.

Common Errors:

There are some common pitfalls of summary writing that you should be aware of.

- Summary and **paraphrase** are not the same thing. A summary distills a text down to a short enumeration of its main components, while a paraphrase merely rewords it.
- In summary assignments, avoid commenting on the content of the source text; instead, focus on communicating the content to your reader as accurately and objectively as possible.
- Summary has a place in argumentative essays such as research papers, but its role in such essays is to support and complement your argument (for instance, when you introduce a secondary source you will briefly summarize it before analyzing it and integrating it into your argument). If your assignment requires you to make an argument about a text, merely summarizing it is not sufficient.

Resources:

- Loyola OWL: “How to Write an Annotated Bibliography,” “Annotated Bibliography Example.”
- Loyola University Chicago Writing Program:
- Anderson, Victoria. *Writing Responsibly: Communities in Conversation*, 2nd Ed. Southlake, TX: Fountainhead Press, 2014. Print.
- [“Annotated Bibliographies,” “Summary,”](#) (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
- [Purdue OWL](#)