Summaries Study Sheet

Goals of this Study Sheet

Being able to accurately summarize a text demonstrates that you have an accurate understanding of what the text was trying to say. This study sheet will go over the importance of summarization, when summarizing is a bad thing, and how summarizing can assist with active reading.

Why and When to Summarize

A summary is a condensed version of a text, put into the words of the person writing said summary. Summaries can be helpful in a number of ways. Firstly, writing a summary can help with reading comprehension. If you struggle with reading textbooks and articles for your classes, writing a summary of what you’ve read can help make sure that you are processing what you are reading. It’s easier to comprehend a concept you are learning if you can put it into your own words.

Another time summaries can be helpful is when you need to include research in a paper. Sometimes you have a source for your paper, and you want to use a bigger section than one that you would usually paraphrase or quote. This is when you could write a summary of the section of text instead.

Summarizing isn’t too hard to do, and sometimes students default to it when they shouldn’t. One case where you should never use summary is when you are told to analyze something. For example, say your professor in your British literature class has had you read George Orwell’s novel 1984 and wants you to analyze the use of language throughout the text. What this does not mean is for you to go through the book and recap each instance where language is used. What this does mean is for you to look at how the author uses language throughout the text, and discuss the meaning behind it (What is the significance behind the types of language used in the book? How does the use of language develop the characters and their conflicts? Why did Orwell give such a
focus to language throughout his novel? etc.). Bottom line: when you are ask to analyze, do not summarize, and when you are asked to summarize, do not analyze. If you are ever confused as to which technique you are being asked to use, clarify with your instructor.

**How to Summarize**

When writing a summary, the first step is to know the material that you have to summarize. To do this, you (obviously) need to read the material. Here are some things that can help you begin to formulate your summary while you read:

1. **Take notes, and also highlight and/or underline while you read.**

2. **Look at the title.** Sometimes the title will contain the author’s main argument, points that the author will cover, or other important information.

3. **Look at the subheadings.** These will often include main points/important information the author will cover. It will also give you a good outline for how to write your summary. If the article doesn’t have subheadings, try coming up with some for the text yourself while you read.

4. **Identify the main point/argument/thesis of the text.** Sometimes this will be clearly stated (usually at the beginning of the article), sometimes it won’t be. Regardless, you need to identify the author’s argument and include that in your summary.

5. **Take note of other important information.** This could include a concept that is explained (if it is a concept your audience is likely familiar with, you don’t need to define/explain it), examples of concepts (if multiple examples are given, you probably just want to include one), answering the five W’s (who, what, where, when, why), etc.

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After you’ve read the material and made note of the important pieces of the text, you can start writing your summary. Here’s the breakdown of how a summary is supposed to be written and what it should contain:

1. **Start with a sentence that introduces the author and the title of the text.**

2. **Keep your summary short.** The exact length will vary depending on the text needing to be summarized, but a good rule of thumb is that a summary should be no more than one-fourth the word count of the text.

3. **Write the summary in your own words.** Firstly, what this means is that you are not using any quotations. Secondly, you need to be careful that you’re not plagiarizing and using the same words that the author of the text is using. You can use a few keywords from the text (probably no more than three per sentence), but everything else should be your own words.

4. **Include the main point/argument/thesis of the text.** This should probably be the first thing you cover. After this, include any other important information/concepts/examples that you found while reading.

5. **Do not analyze the text.** Your summary should merely be a condensation of the text being summarized. The voice of your writing should be completely neutral, and you shouldn’t offer any analysis or opinion on the text. Keep in mind that this is a summary, and not a response to the text.

**In Conclusion**

Hopefully you now understand the purpose behind and the process of summarizing. Be sure to practice and make use of this skill, as it can be very helpful when working on different kinds of assignments. Also, remember to use summarizing in its proper context, and avoid using it when you have been asked to analyze something, or to give your own opinion.

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