

Writing Summaries

A proposal, an artist's statement, a design brief, a book, gallery or exhibition review, a research paper, a biography — all of these require that you summarize key ideas and information. Here are a few key ideas and strategies that you should keep in mind.

FRAMING

Framing allows you to acknowledge your sources, and provide a larger context for your reader. It also allows your reader to keep in touch with your sources. If you are writing a summary and you don't remind your reader that the ideas you are summarizing belong to someone else, then you will run into the problem of "owning" those ideas. This is not only a form of plagiarism, it can also be quite problematic, especially if you don't share the opinion of the author. **Please see the handout on [Using Quotations](#) for more information about this practice.**

SUMMARIZING

The act of summarizing requires that you become familiar with the difference between a high level abstract idea and a low level detail. When you summarize, you only express the main idea and leave out the details. With academic writing, these abstract ideas or concepts are often easy to recognize and, in many cases, they will be emphasized in the introduction. The terms "postcolonial," "hegemony," "masculinity," "feminism," "ideology," "myth," "racism," and "gender" are all high level terms. They are abstract notions and ideas that sum up a way of thinking, a political position, an act, or a movement.

Summarizing an essay, a story, a chapter of a book or even just a section of an academic article may not be easy, but it is something that is integral to academic writing and to the research process. You not only have to come to a clear understanding of what is being said in the original, you need to convey the author's message as objectively and as accurately as possible and you may need to expand your vocabulary in order to do the whole process justice!

EXAMPLES

In the following student paper, an analysis of William Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning," the writer moves from more abstract ideas to more specific details that support those ideas.

Throughout the story, Sarty experiences emotions of grief, despair and fear. He is not only torn, he is also weary of his life, tired of the endless violence, the poverty, the constant migrations, the "battered stove, the broken beds and chairs, the clock inlaid with mother of pearl, which would not run, stopped some fourteen minutes past two o'clock of a dead and forgotten time" (460). This kind of life is becoming unbearable for him, for it contains no hope—only an unending gray horizon of discouragement, grief, and pain.

The words and phrases “grief,” “despair,” “fear,” pain,” “poverty,” “violence,” “discouragement,” “dead and forgotten time” are all abstract. The description of the “battered stove, the broken beds and chairs, the clock inlaid with mother of pearl stopped some fourteen minutes past two o’clock ” are details that enable the reader to picture the poverty and despair. We can see and touch and maybe even smell a battered stove, a broken bed. These are tangible objects. When you’re writing an analysis of a short story or a critical summary of an article, you will need to provide just enough of this kind of detail in order to support your claims. Don’t provide too much, as your goal is to tell your reader what the general point of the article or story is.

In the following excerpt from George Orwell’s essay, “Marrakech,” he describes the burial of a corpse that takes place just outside the city of Marrakech in 1939:

The little crowd of mourners — all men and boys, no women — threaded their way across the market-place between the piles of pomegranates and the taxis and the camels, wailing a short chant over and over again. What really appeals to the flies is that the corpses here are never put into coffins, they are merely wrapped in a piece of rag and carried on a rough wooden bier on the shoulders of four friends. When the friends get to the burying-ground they hack an oblong hole a foot or two deep, dump the body in it and fling over it a little of the dried-up, lumpy earth, which is like broken brick. No gravestone, no name, no identifying mark of any kind. The burying-ground is merely a huge waste of hummocky earth, like a derelict building-lot. After a month or two no one can even be certain where his own relatives are buried. (136)

In summarizing this section of the essay, you may write something like this:

In his description of a burial scene, Orwell suggests that, for the poverty stricken people of Marrakech, a proper burial is not an option. The dead are carried on the backs of friends and family, thrown in a shallow, unmarked grave, which is barely covered by “lumpy earth,” and then neglected.

This summary is certainly not as interesting or as descriptive as the original, but it does emphasize the high level idea of poverty and neglect that Orwell is trying to convey. It also includes a reporting expression (“Orwell suggests”), the borrowed words are placed in quotation marks (“lumpy earth”), and it is approximately 1/4 the length of the original.

MORE INFORMATION

The University of Toronto has a useful handout on Paraphrase and Summary:

<http://www.utoronto.ca/paraphrase>

The OWL at Purdue University draws important distinctions between quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing in this handout: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/using_research/quoting_paraphrasing_and_summarizing/index.html

It may also be useful to you to consult the Writing Centre’s handouts on [Using Quotations](#) and [Writing Critical Responses to Texts](#).