

Guidelines for Writing a Summary

(adapted from www.hunter.cuny.edu)

To summarize is to condense a text to its main points and to do so in your own words. To include every detail is neither necessary nor desirable. Instead, you should extract only those elements which you think are most important – the main idea (or thesis) and its essential supporting points, which in the original passage may have been interwoven with less important material.

It is important to remember that a summary is not an outline or synopsis of the points that the author makes in the order that the author gives them. Instead, a summary is a distillation of the ideas or argument of the text. It is a reconstruction of the major point or points of development of a text, beginning with the thesis or main idea, followed by the points or details that support or elaborate on that idea.

If a text is organized in a linear fashion you may be able to write a summary simply by outlining the major points from the beginning of the text to the end. However, you should not assume that this will always be the case. Not all writers use such a straightforward structure. They may not state the thesis or main idea immediately at the beginning, but rather build up to it slowly, and they may introduce a point of development in one place and then return to it later in the text.

However, for the sake of clarity, a summary should present the author's points in a straightforward structure. In order to write a good summary, you may have to gather minor points or components of an argument from different places in the text in order to summarize the text in an organized way. A point made in the beginning of an essay and then one made toward the end may need to be grouped together in your summary to concisely convey the argument that the author is making. In the end, you will have read, digested, and reconstructed the text in a shorter, more concise form.

QUALITIES OF A SUMMARY

A good summary should be comprehensive, concise, coherent, and independent. These qualities are explained below:

1. A summary must be comprehensive. You should isolate all the important points in the original passage and note them down in a list. Review all the ideas on your list, and include in your summary all the ones that are indispensable to the author's development of his/her thesis or main idea.
2. A summary must be concise. Eliminate repetitions in your list, even if the author restates the same points. Your summary should be considerably shorter than the source. You are hoping to create an overview; therefore, you need not include every repetition of a point or every supporting detail.
3. A summary must be coherent. It should make sense as a piece of writing in its own right; it should not merely be taken directly from your list of notes or sound like a disjointed collection of points.
4. A summary must be independent. You are not being asked to imitate the author of the text you are writing about. On the contrary, you are expected to maintain your own voice throughout the summary. Don't simply quote the author; instead use your own words to express your understanding of what you have read. After all, your summary is based on your interpretation of the writer's points or ideas. However, you should be careful not to create any misrepresentation or distortion by introducing comments or criticisms of your own.

TWO TECHNIQUES FOR WRITING SUMMARIES

Summarizing Shorter Texts (ten pages or fewer)

1. Write a one-sentence summary of each paragraph.
2. Formulate a single sentence that summarizes the whole text.
3. Write a paragraph (or more): begin with the overall summary sentence and follow it with the paragraph summary sentences.
4. Rearrange and rewrite the paragraph to make it clear and concise, to eliminate repetition and relatively minor points, and to provide transitions. The final version should be a complete, unified, and coherent whole

Summarizing Longer Texts (eleven pages or more)

1. Outline the text. Break it down into its major sections--groups of paragraphs focused on a common topics – and list the main supporting points for each section.
2. Write a one or two sentence summary of each section.
3. Formulate a single sentence to summarize the whole text, looking at the author's thesis or topic sentences as a guide.
4. Write a paragraph (or more): begin with the overall summary sentence and follow it with the section summary sentences.
5. Rewrite and rearrange your paragraph(s) as needed to make your writing clear and concise, to eliminate relatively minor or repetitious points, and to provide transitions. Make sure your summary includes all the major supporting points of each idea. The final version should be a unified, complete, and coherent whole.

TASK: READING SUMMARY

Read the following article carefully and write a summary of the key points. Please bear in mind that your text should be a synthesis of the original expressed in your own words, not a collection of quotations; it should be a coherent text, not a list of points.

New figures on access to higher education serve as a reminder that the opportunities A-level results buy remain heavily dependent on social background and schooling. And, as revealed recently, those in charge of improving access to higher education for the least well off continue to harbour concerns that universities that want to maximise income will take on the middle-class applicants who are most likely to complete their courses and so pay their fees.

There has been no lack of political appetite to champion social mobility and fair opportunity. There is no shortage of resource: a total of £1bn is spent a year on initiatives to widen access to university. Yet we seem to be moving backwards. What has gone wrong? The answer lies in the wrong solution our political and academic elites have pursued: social mobility through expansion rather than rebalancing. The agenda has been one of higher education for all, predominantly through creating places at newer universities, rather than radically opening up access to top institutions. Hence the paradox of recent figures: while the number of the poorest young people going to any university has continued to rise, just one in five young people from comprehensives and further education colleges got into the top third most selective universities, compared with 86% of privately educated young people.

The flaw at the heart of social mobility by expansion is its assumption that all degrees are equal. The reality is far from the truth. On the one hand, a degree from a top university is almost a prerequisite for a job in professions such as medicine, the law, the civil service and the media. On the other, there is huge variation in the employment prospects of graduates of newer institutions. Too many young people find themselves in a "graduate" job that would have recruited school leavers 20 years ago; and four in 10 recent graduates are in jobs not even requiring a degree. Is it a responsible message to young people that it is always worth taking on debt of at least £35,000 to go to university, regardless of the quality of the institution?

It is time to get rid of expansionary social mobility policies and pursue a more aggressive strategy: opening up the finite number of places at the most selective universities to a broader group of young people. The starting point should be a defence of academic elitism. It is right to despise academic selection at age 11, but it is also right to defend selection at age 18. The best young people should be creamed off to study in our top institutions. The problem with the current system is it doesn't work: it is ineffective at selecting the brightest regardless of social background.

Rebalancing cannot be achieved without essential school improvement. The gap in educational achievement between children of different social backgrounds explains much of the university access gap and is produced by the vastly different educational opportunities they experience. School improvement will not be achieved without encouraging the best leaders and teachers to gravitate towards schools in the most deprived areas. Schools must also be held robustly accountable for narrowing the gap.

There also need to be stronger incentives for elite universities to work effectively with schools to raise aspiration. The problem is not a lack of cash, but that for too long there has been no real accountability for how universities spend it. Elite universities make shamefully little effort to understand the impact of their work with schools and how they can improve it.

There is much more room for innovation and evaluation. More universities should be looking at how they can engage primary schools, given the importance of starting young: for example, the charity IntoUniversity provides academic support and mentoring to primary school children and takes them into universities to undertake projects and lessons. If there was enough commitment, bright children from poor backgrounds could get a passport to a national, university-sponsored support programme, with a guaranteed place at an elite institution should they get the minimum required grades. Critics would cry social engineering. Yet this ignores the fact that young people from state schools with equivalent grades are less likely to go to a highly selective university than their privately educated peers, but more likely to perform better than them if they do go.

As important is the quality of the offer for young people not going to the most selective universities, regardless of their social background. It is not enough to expect them to put up with paying large sums for courses of questionable quality simply because that's the way our system has evolved. Over time, they will come to expect cheaper, better options. Higher education has been slow to embrace shifts in technology and universities will need to be more innovative.

Employers should redirect some of the energy they spend complaining about graduates' lack of employability skills towards creating more opportunities to work and train on the job. And government should support schemes that help young people bridge the social transition from school to work in other ways. For example, in the City Year scheme, young people mentor children and run activities in schools in deprived areas, and access training and development from its business backers.

Achieving greater social mobility by expanding the number of university places has reached its limits. To go further down this route with fees of £9,000 a year would be irresponsible. We should be proud of a system that boasts several of the world's leading institutions. But we should feel ashamed their doors remain closed to many of our best young people because of where they were born and which school they went to.