

Summary: Using it Wisely

What this handout is about

Knowing how to summarize something you have read, seen, or heard is a valuable skill, one you have probably used in many writing assignments. It is important, though, to recognize when you must go beyond describing, explaining, and restating texts and offer a more complex analysis. This handout will help you distinguish between summary and analysis and avoid inappropriate summary in your academic writing.

Is summary a bad thing?

Not necessarily. But it's important that you keep your assignment and your audience in mind as you write. If your assignment requires an argument with a thesis statement and supporting evidence—as many academic writing assignments do—then you should limit the amount of summary in your paper. You might use summary to provide background, set the stage, or illustrate supporting evidence, but keep it very brief: a few sentences should do the trick. Most of your paper should focus on your argument. (Our handout on argument will help you construct a good one.)

Writing a summary of what you know about your topic before you start drafting your actual paper can sometimes be helpful. If you are unfamiliar with the material you're analyzing, you may need to summarize what you've read in order to understand your reading and get your thoughts in order. Once you figure out what you know about a subject, it's easier to decide what you want to argue.

You may also want to try some other pre-writing activities that can help you develop your own analysis. Outlining, freewriting, and mapping make it easier to get your thoughts on the page. (Check out our handout on brainstorming for some suggested techniques.)

Why is it so tempting to stick with summary and skip analysis?

Many writers rely too heavily on summary because it is what they can most easily write. If you're stalled by a difficult writing prompt, summarizing the plot of *The Great Gatsby* may be more appealing than staring at the computer for three hours and wondering what to say about F. Scott Fitzgerald's use of color symbolism. After all, the plot is usually the easiest part of a work to understand. Something similar can happen even when what you are writing about has no plot: if you don't really understand an author's argument, it might seem easiest to just repeat what he or she said.

To write a more analytical paper, you may need to review the text or film you are writing about, with a focus on the elements that are relevant to your thesis. If possible, carefully consider your writing assignment before reading, viewing, or listening to the material about which you'll be writing so that your encounter with the material will be more purposeful. (We offer a handout on reading towards writing.)

How do I know if I'm summarizing?

As you read through your essay, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I stating something that would be obvious to a reader or viewer?
- Does my essay move through the plot, history, or author's argument in chronological order, or in the exact same order the author used?
- Am I simply describing what happens, where it happens, or whom it happens to?

A "yes" to any of these questions may be a sign that you are summarizing. **If you answer yes to the questions below, though, it is a sign that your paper may have more analysis (which is usually a good thing):**

- Am I making an original argument about the text?
- Have I arranged my evidence around my own points, rather than just following the author's or plot's order?
- Am I explaining why or how an aspect of the text is significant?

Certain phrases are warning signs of summary. **Keep an eye out for these:**

- "[This essay] is about..."
- "[This book] is the story of..."
- "[This author] writes about..."
- "[This movie] is set in..."

Here's an example of an introductory paragraph containing unnecessary summary. **Sentences that summarize are in italics:**

The Great Gatsby is the story of a mysterious millionaire, Jay Gatsby, who lives alone on an island in New York. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the book, but the narrator is Nick Carraway. Nick is Gatsby's neighbor, and he chronicles the story of Gatsby and his circle of friends, beginning with his introduction to the strange man and ending with Gatsby's tragic death. In the story, Nick describes his environment through various colors, including green, white, and grey. Whereas white and grey symbolize false purity and decay respectively, the color green offers a symbol of hope.

Here's how you might change the paragraph to make it a more effective introduction:

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald provides readers with detailed descriptions of the area surrounding East Egg, New York. In fact, Nick Carraway's narration describes the setting with as much detail as the characters in the book. Nick's description of the colors in his environment presents the book's themes, symbolizing significant aspects of the post-World War I era. Whereas white and grey symbolize the false purity and decay of the 1920s, the color green offers a symbol of hope.

This version of the paragraph mentions the book's title, author, setting, and narrator so that the reader is reminded of the text. And that sounds a lot like summary—but the paragraph quickly moves on to the writer's own main topic: the setting and its relationship to the main themes of the book. The paragraph then closes with the writer's specific thesis about the symbolism of white, grey, and green.

How do I write more analytically?

Analysis requires breaking something—like a story, poem, play, theory, or argument—into parts so you can understand how those parts work together to make the whole. Ideally, you should begin to analyze a work as you read or view it instead of waiting until after you're done—it may help you to jot down some notes as you read. Your notes can be about major themes or ideas you notice, as well as anything that intrigues, puzzles, excites, or irritates you. Remember, analytic writing goes beyond the obvious to discuss questions of how and why—so ask yourself those questions as you read.

The St. Martin's Handbook (the bulleted material below is quoted from p. 38 of the fifth edition) encourages readers to take the following steps in order to analyze a text:

- Identify evidence that supports or illustrates the main point or theme as well as anything that seems to contradict it.
- Consider the relationship between the words and the visuals in the work. Are they well integrated, or are they sometimes at odds with one another? What functions do the visuals serve? To capture attention? To provide more detailed information or illustration? To appeal to readers' emotions?
- Decide whether the sources used are trustworthy.
- Identify the work's underlying assumptions about the subject, as well as any biases it reveals.

Once you have written a draft, some questions you might want to ask yourself about your writing are "What's my point?" or "What am I arguing in this paper?" If you can't answer these questions, then you haven't gone beyond summarizing. You may also want to think about how much of your writing comes from your own ideas or arguments. If you're only reporting someone else's ideas, you probably aren't offering an analysis.

What strategies can help me avoid excessive summary?

- Read the assignment (the prompt) as soon as you get it. Make sure to reread it before you start writing. Go back to your assignment often while you write. (Check out our handout on reading assignments).
- Formulate an argument (including a good thesis) and be sure that your final draft is structured around it, including aspects of the plot, story, history, background, etc. only as evidence for your argument. (You can refer to our handout on constructing thesis statements).
- Read critically—imagine having a dialogue with the work you are discussing. What parts do you agree with? What parts do you disagree with? What questions do you have about the work? Does it remind you of other works you've seen?
- Make sure you have clear topic sentences that make arguments in support of your thesis statement. (Read our handout on paragraph development if you want to work on writing strong paragraphs).
- Use two different highlighters to mark your paper. With one color, highlight areas of summary or description. With the other, highlight areas of analysis. For many college papers, it's a good idea to have lots of analysis and minimal summary/description.
- Ask yourself: What part of the essay would be obvious to a reader/viewer of the work being discussed? What parts (words, sentences, paragraphs) of the essay could be deleted without loss? In most cases, your paper should focus on points that are essential and that will be interesting to people who have already read or seen the work you are writing about.

But I'm writing a review! Don't I have to summarize?

That depends. If you're writing a critique of a piece of literature, a film, or a dramatic performance, you don't necessarily need to give away much of the plot. The point is to let readers decide whether they want to enjoy it for themselves. If you do summarize, keep your summary brief and to the point.

Instead of telling your readers that the play, book, or film was “boring,” “interesting,” or “really good,” tell them specifically what parts of the work you’re talking about. It’s also important that you go beyond adjectives and explain how the work achieved its effect (how was it interesting?) and why you think the author/director wanted the audience to react a certain way. (We have a special handout on writing reviews that offers more tips.)

If you’re writing a review of an academic book or article, it may be important for you to summarize the main ideas and give an overview of the organization so your readers can decide whether it is relevant to their specific research interests.

If you are unsure how much (if any) summary a particular assignment requires, ask your instructor for guidance.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Barnet, Sylvan and Cain, William E. *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*. 8th ed. New York: Longman, 2000.

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. 4th ed. New York: Longman, 2001.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *The St. Martin’s Handbook*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. 5th ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.

“Strategies for Avoiding Plot Summary.” Temple University Writing Center. 18 January 2005
<http://www.temple.edu/writingctr/student_resources/plot_summary.htm>.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License.

You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire handout (just click print) and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

If you enjoy using our handouts, we appreciate contributions of acknowledgement.

[Make a Gift](#)