

# Summary & Paraphrase Tips



## Why do I need to know how to summarize?

Summarizing and/or paraphrasing some or all of a text is a necessary step in communicating your own arguments, either about the text or about issues the text addresses.

## Don't we have to include our opinion or a thesis now that we're writing at a college level?

Some written forms rely on summary/paraphrase for their content. A few examples:

- literature review (a write-up of the arguments in relevant works on a given topic)
- annotated bibliography (each bibliographic entry includes a brief summary of the relevant points in the text)
- abstract (a brief version of the argument of an article, essay, or book)

Summary/paraphrase can also be crucial within standard analytic or argumentative essays: when evidence is too bulky to include in its entirety, or requires some context to make sense, or is inherently un-quotable (rhetorical structure, or images, for example).

## What do I need to do to summarize or paraphrase something?

Summarizing and/or paraphrasing a text involves several steps:

- Identify the main argument.
- Identify the rhetorical strategies by which the argument is made.
- Identify any unspoken elements of the argument (assumptions, logical leaps, reasonable counter-arguments, etc.).

## What if I'm having trouble identifying those things?

On an even more basic level, identifying the above components requires reading each sentence closely, to prioritize the many ideas expressed in even a short excerpt from a text.

Here are some tips for breaking down and prioritizing ideas within a sentence, from sentence to sentence, within a passage, and within a text as a whole:

- Pay attention to “key words”: nouns, evocative language (especially verbs, but also adjectives and adverbs), logical transitions.

### nouns:

- convey the major characters
- convey major ideas the sentence/passage/text addresses

### evocative language:

- conveys the author's attitude towards the major ideas
- helps establish the author's argumentative position

### logical transitions:

- convey how the major ideas are connected
- convey which ideas are major claims, which are examples, which are expansion of an example or claim
- key to prioritizing the major ideas and establishing their relationships to each other

- Note such qualities as page real estate and structure.

page real estate:

- more space on the page suggests more significance, or more complexity (takes longer to explain—usually bothering to explain it means it’s also significant)
- less space on the page suggests less significance, more simplicity, or an assumption of common knowledge (no need to explain what we all already understand)

structure:

- location of an idea within a sentence or within a passage can point to its importance relative to other ideas
- opening or closing usually means important claims or logical connections
- middle usually means examples, development, evidence
- lists suggest parallel importance
- Note: If other details indicate something different—say, major claim embedded in the middle of a paragraph—that probably communicates something important about the nature of the argument—does it require a lot of explanation? does accepting it lead to challenging applications or logical continuations?

**How do I write this in my own voice, but without including my opinion?**

In writing up your summary/paraphrase of a text, remember:

- The purpose is to fairly communicate the argument of the text, not to make your own argument about the text’s validity, meaning, or significance.
- Use statements of fact, that describe the text in ways everyone who reads the original text would agree with.
- Use clear attributions, so your reader doesn’t confuse your ideas with the ones from the text. If you state something the text says without clarifying that the text says it, readers assume it’s your idea. Instead, try attribution phrases like these:
  - The author claims \_\_\_\_\_
  - “Article Title” asserts \_\_\_\_\_
  - The authors provide several examples, such as \_\_\_\_\_
  - One question the chapter raises is \_\_\_\_\_
  - The main argument the author proposes is \_\_\_\_\_
- Avoid quoting directly. A summary or paraphrase should simplify the original text for your reader, and a quote, instead, puts the text in front of your reader and asks them to do the work.
- If you must quote, perhaps because there is a specific word or phrase used in a unique way, follow up the quote with your own paraphrase or explanation of the quote’s meaning.
- If there are serious logical flaws in the text, or major unaddressed assumptions, you may indicate these, but do so in a fair, balanced, and respectful manner.
- Use in-text citation as appropriate to the style you’re using.
- Example sentence paraphrasing a specific idea in APA style: “In *Animal Liberation* (2015), Singer asserts that many children are naturally inclined to vegetarianism and forced to eat meat by their parents, but does not identify the sources of this information” (p. 310).