

SUMMARIES AND REVIEWS OF A BOOK OR AN ARTICLE: GUIDELINES FOR WRITING

Asking students to do a summary or a review of a book or an article is a favorite assignment of professors because such assignments require students to read carefully and digest a work that is directly relevant to the subject being taught in a class. On the surface, such assignments look pretty simple and easy; in reality, they demand a certain amount of sophistication on the student's part. To write an effective summary or review, you need good skills in reading comprehension and analysis, as well as a fairly good grasp of the academic field in which the work was written. Of course, we can turn that statement around and say that writing summaries and reviews helps you develop your reading and analytical skills as well as giving you a better sense of a field of knowledge--IF you approach such assignments properly. And that's the purpose of this handout: to give you specific guidelines and strategies that will enable you to write an effective summary or review as you develop a better understanding of the nature and purpose of this type of writing.

Perhaps you've already realized that assignments for summaries and reviews can vary. Sometimes an instructor asks you to keep your paper to one or two pages; other times you are asked to write five or six pages. Sometimes an instructor will ask you to critique or evaluate the book or article; other times he/she will tell you to summarize only. Sometimes the assignment sheet will contain a list of questions or issues you should address; other times the instructor will expect you to know what to do.

These variations should alert you that writing a review or summary is not like solving a problem in algebra. There is no pat formula for the content or form of a book review, which you will see clearly enough if you take a look at some book reviews in newspapers, magazines, or scholarly journals. The approach of reviewers varies according to what they want to say about a work. But if you look at reviews as a whole, you will see that they end up accomplishing two things: (1) they give the reader an overview of what the author of a work is doing and saying; and (2) they tell us the reviewer's assessment of the work: what is valuable about it, what its limitations are. While both a summary and a review give readers an overview of what the author is doing and saying, generally a review also contains the reviewer's assessment of the work. If you ever look at other types of reviews--reviews of movies or concerts--you will realize that all reviews have essentially the same purpose: to tell us what a work (book, movie, concert) is about, and to give us the reviewer's opinion of whether or not it is worth our time to investigate it on our own.

In any case, what a review or summary of a book or an article IS NOT is a "rewrite" of the original, a paragraph-by-paragraph paraphrase. At the end of this handout I give you an explicit sample of a sentence-by-sentence paraphrase of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and a true summary of this speech; you may want to refer to it as you read over the advice that follows. Doing detailed paraphrases is the biggest trap that student reviewers fall into. To

avoid the trap, you need a better sense of where you need to stand in relation to the work you are reviewing, which means having a better sense of the author's relationship to his/her subject.

GUIDELINE 1: To do an effective summary/review, you must stand at some distance from the work, perceiving it as a whole and as a specific person's interpretation of a body of information.

It is not uncommon to read student summaries in which the author's name and/or the title of the work are not even a part of the body of the paper--or, if they are included, they are mentioned once and never mentioned again. In such reviews the body of the paper begins to sound like the reviewer's ideas and points, not someone else's. Perhaps these students assume that the readers will remember that they are doing a review. But I worry that these students assume that the content of the work they are reviewing is simply FACT or TRUTH, ideas that everybody already knows and accepts. In reality, a book or an article embodies the specific ideas or point of view of a specific person or persons whose name(s) are printed right next to the title of the work. You can begin to take the proper stance toward a work you are summarizing by constantly using the author's name whenever you refer to the work. Throughout the whole process of preparing and writing your summary/review, say--and think--"Wilson believes . . .," "Jones says . . .," "From Smith's perspective . . ."

Using the author's name will help you to remember that you are reading someone's interpretation of a body of material. It should also help you to remember that there are other possible interpretations of this same material, other possible points of view. This strategy will also help you dissociate yourself from the author's point of view. It is true that the author wants you to adopt her point of view; she wants you to think about this material the way she does. To some extent the purpose of all writing is to convince and persuade. And, if you are fairly ignorant of the subject matter, it is hard not to adopt the author's perspective. But if you do not dissociate yourself from the author's thinking--if you do not constantly remember that you are examining someone else's point of view--it is all too easy to start paraphrasing what the author says, point by point, which is not the way to write a good summary.

GUIDELINE 2: To do an effective review, you need to figure out what the author IS DOING.

Yes, I said DOING, not SAYING. We will return to what the author is saying in a minute, but only when we are able to put the author's specific ideas into perspective. To gain that perspective, we need to put this specific work into a larger context.

The book or article you are reading is the result of a great deal of work the author has engaged in, and this author has, in turn, been heavily influenced by her training, her experiences, and what is going on in the field in which she is working. Now you need to get a clearer sense of this background and how it explains this particular work. You need answers to three major questions:

1. What is the author's main area of investigation? What field is she working in, and what part of that field is she focusing on? What main body of information/facts is she examining?
2. What question has the author asked herself about this material, or what problems does she see in the way the material has been previously interpreted or examined?
3. What is the author's basic approach to the subject? Answering this question involves considering the theories she accepts or rejects, as well as the basic manner in which she systematically examines the available evidence.

Once you realize that you need to find answers to such questions, you will see that an author usually gives you the answers; it is a matter of knowing where to look for them. Questions 1 and 2 are usually addressed directly by the author in the beginning of the work. So, if you are summarizing a book, look carefully at the preface or foreword, as well as the introductory chapter; if you are summarizing an article, study the opening paragraphs.

Information about question 3 may also be found in the opening segments of a work, but also look for clues in the body of the piece. Authors normally refer to the theories or work of others, by name, right in the body of their texts ("According to Blankenship . . ."), but sometimes theoretical arguments are carried on in footnotes; so if you are having trouble answering question 3, check your author's notes. Similarly, an author's technical vocabulary or jargon can be an important key to the approach he/she is using. In a work in psychology, for example, if the author keeps talking about the id, the ego, the superego, and an Oedipal complex, the language may indicate that he/she is following a Freudian approach; another author who consistently speaks of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, imperialistic capitalism and alienated workers might well be a Marxist.

Here are some more specific strategies you can use to determine what the author is doing. Don't just read them. Get out pen and paper and write out your responses.

- What do you know about the author? What is her area of expertise? What do you know about other work she has done? It might be wise to look up the author in a biographical dictionary.
- What, specifically and concretely, is the subject matter of this work? What exactly is the author looking at? How much "territory" does the author cover? Generally, summarize for yourself the TYPE of evidence the author is using.
- Look for explicit statements the author makes about what she is doing in this work. Look for statements the author makes about the problem she is addressing, questions she asked, the area of investigation.

- What does the author tell you about where she stands in relation to other experts/theories/approaches in the field? What does she say about whether she agrees or disagrees with other people's work? theories?
- Consider the general approach or methods the author uses in examining the evidence. What does the author tell you about these matters?
- What are some of the author's assumptions or premises? This question may be hard to answer, but try. Make a list of the general ideas this author accepts as "true" and upon which she bases her general thesis.
- Using what you know about this subject (from class lectures, other reading, other sources of information), where does the author stand? Can you place her ideas into any specific "school" or approach? In looking for answers to these questions, pay attention to the author's technical vocabulary and/or explicit references to specific theories or experts.

After you have written out your responses (and anything else you think about as you are writing), ask yourself this question--what is this author doing? Answer this question in one paragraph, no longer than a page. This summary of what the author is doing will become the central framework for your review or summary.

GUIDELINE 3: Now, put what the author is SAYING into the context of what you have just learned about what the author is doing.

I will remind you yet again that you are doing a summary, which means that you cannot repeat what the author has said in any detail. Standing at a distance from the work, here are two things you now want to know:

- (1) What major conclusion or conclusions has the author drawn? What has he decided that the facts mean?
- (2) How did the author arrive at this conclusion? What is the general outline of his argument, or what basic procedures did he follow?

Often a brief summary of a work is called an "abstract"; this term reminds us that you are "abstracting" or pulling out the general skeleton or outline of the author's ideas, which necessitates leaving out specific detail. Having focused on what the author is doing should help you, at this point, to focus on the main points of what the author is saying.

Here are more specific strategies you can use to figure out what the author is saying. Don't just read them; get out a pen and paper and write out your responses. It would be best to respond to these points without looking at the book or article; just go by what you remember.

- Write out the author's CENTRAL conclusion in ONE sentence. Put it in your own words.

- In your own words, answer this question: What are the three or four MAIN points the author makes in this work? Or, write a skeleton outline of the author's argument or general procedure.
- Drawing upon what you remember, what topic does the author spend most of his time talking about? Why? Summarize in one or two sentences what he says about this topic.
- Consider the general pattern of organization of this work. How is the book or article laid out? What does the author talk about where? Sketch out an outline. If you are working with a book, keep it general; consider the roman numeral points in the table of contents. How does the order in which the author discusses his points fit with his main conclusion?

After you have written out your responses (and anything else that occurs to you as you write), ask yourself this question: What is the author saying? Answer this question in one paragraph, no longer than a page.

GUIDELINE 4: What to do if you have been asked to critique the book or article.

If you feel nervous about your ability or authority to evaluate your author's work, your feelings are justified. Normally, book reviews are written by experts in a field. But this is no reason why you should weasel and waffle, or resort to inane statements like "This is a good book." There are essentially three ways you can approach your critique (you can use one, or a combination): (1) you can put this work into the larger context of the field as a whole; if you feel that you do not know enough about the field per se, it would work equally well to put this work into the context of your class, drawing on what you have already read and learned in the course; (2) you can examine the internal logic of the work; (3) speaking as a student, you can assess the value of this work for students like yourself. If your professor has included a list of questions or issues you should address, you should look to this list as a key to your assessment.

Evaluating by putting the work in context

If you choose this approach, just go back and review what you wrote in following guideline

2. Several other questions you might ask yourself are:

- If this work was originally written a while ago, has it been influential in the field? If the work has been written more recently, how does it reflect or diverge from current approaches/theories in the field?
- What has this author added to the body of knowledge in this field? Has his approach changed our way of thinking about this topic?

Internal logic

If you choose this approach, you are generally looking to see if the author actually followed the premises/procedures he set up for himself, and/or if you found his argument convincing or his procedures valid.

- Did the author's points follow logically from the evidence? If you remember any points where they didn't, why aren't they logical? What's the problem?
- Did the author's final conclusion follow logically from his main points? If you see any problem here, what is it?
- Is there anything that you feel the author failed to take into account?
- Did you accept the author's main premises and assumptions? If not, which do you not accept?
- Did you find the argument, procedure convincing? Why? Why not?
- Would you say the general argument is clear and easy to follow? Why? Why not?

Value for fellow students

- Would you recommend this book to other students in your class? Why? Why not?
- What did YOU find most valuable in this work? Why?
- If this work was difficult for you, what problem(s) did you have? Is the problem in the work itself, or is the issue your lack of knowledge of the subject matter?

GUIDELINE 5: Writing up your summary or review.

If you have been diligent about following the strategies I have outlined up to now, the major part of your work is finished. You should have a clear sense of this work as a whole. Whether you are writing only a summary (without critiquing the work) or you are writing a review that includes your reactions/evaluations of the work, you will be talking about what the author is doing and saying, so in both cases you should refer back to what you have written in following the first three guidelines. If you are also critiquing the work or giving your reactions, you should use the notes you have made in following guidelines 1 through 4. Your task now is to write a coherent paper with a very clear thesis and an outline that elaborates on that thesis.

In ONE sentence, answer this question: What is the main point I want to make about what this author is doing/saying?

You now see that, as a reviewer, you are giving us your point of view of this author's work. If you are writing a summary, you will focus your thesis strictly on your perception of what the author is doing/saying:

In *Our Times*, Arthur K. Smith explains the Reagan administration's foreign policy as a continuation of the Cold War mentality of the 1950s.

If you are writing a review, your thesis could include your evaluation of the work:

By tracing the Reagan administration's foreign policy back to the Cold War mentality of the 1950s, Arthur K. Smith gives us one of the most convincing explanations for our involvement in Nicaragua and other actions of the U.S. government during the 1980s.

At this point the final length of your summary or review becomes important. Whether your review is short or long, your main objective will always be to give a satisfactory overview of the work as a whole. But the shorter the paper, the more you will have to be content with what you consider THE central points.

- Throughout your paper, it must be clear to your readers that this is a review or summary.
 - By the end of the opening paragraph, you should have given your reader the full name of the author and the title of the work, and full bibliographic information (where and when it was published). It is not sufficient to give the author's name and the title in the title of your paper. You can meet this guideline by setting off complete information about the work at the beginning of your opening paragraph, the way it is normally done in published reviews. Or you can give the author's complete name and the complete name of the work in the body of your paper, and include publication information in a footnote. You can indicate that you are writing a review by saying, directly, "I am reviewing Sylvia Scott's *The Way Things Were*" but there are more graceful ways of accomplishing this goal. The two thesis statements I gave as examples above clearly tell the reader that this paper is a review.
 - Throughout your paper, consistently identify the source of the ideas you are summarizing by using the author's name: "Jones's point is . . .," "Jones goes on to say . . .," "She tells us that . . ." It may feel awkward, but it is essential.
- Use direct quotations very judiciously and sparingly. On the other had, if you find yourself taking a sentence or two from the author, changing a word here and there, it would be better to quote the relevant passages directly.

These cautions about quoting directly do not refer to using the author's technical vocabulary. In most cases the author is using the jargon of the field; since these words are commonly used by experts when they talk to one another, you can (and should) use

this language too. If the author coins his/her own terms in the work, all you need to do is to let us know how he/she defines these terms; then you can use them, too.

Early in his evaluation Kitcher makes a distinction between sociobiology, which examines nonhuman behavior, and "pop sociobiology," a term he uses for those works that make "grand claims about human nature and human social institutions."

Philip Kitcher, *Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985, pp. 14-15.

HOW TO, AND HOW NOT TO, DO A SUMMARY, USING LINCOLN'S GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

LINCOLN'S GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war; testing whether the nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate--we cannot consecrate--we cannot hallow--this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from this honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

The following is NOT a summary but a sentence-by-sentence paraphrase that is actually a form of plagiarism:

Eighty-seven years earlier the Founding Fathers had brought forth a new nation on this continent, born in liberty and dedicated to the idea that all men are created equal. But this nation was now engaged in a great civil conflict, testing whether the United States or any country set up on the principles on which the United States was founded could continue to endure. People on the Union side met on a famous battlefield of this civil war. They were there to dedicate part of this battlefield as a final resting place for those who gave their lives that the nation might live. They were there to dedicate themselves to a larger task that still remained before them. From those who died they would take increased devotion to the cause for which these men died. They resolved that these dead should not have died in vain; that

this nation, under God, should have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people should not perish from the earth.

A legitimate summary, in which the reviewer is considering what Lincoln was doing and saying, would look like this:

In dedicating the national memorial cemetery on the battlefield at Gettysburg in 1863, Lincoln not only eulogizes the men who fought on the Union side but makes an understated but eloquent plea that his audience remember the cause for which so many of them died, the preservation of the United States as it was constituted eighty-seven years earlier. His speech echoes ideas formalized in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, reminding the audience that the United States was "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" and asking for a renewed commitment to the preservation of a "government of the people, by the people, for the people."