

SUMMARIZING

A summary may be referred to as a précis or an abstract. (In technical writing, a distinction is made between these terms. If you are doing technical writing, you will need to know the distinction. In that case refer to a good technical writing text or manual or to the style sheet of the company initiating the report.)

The writer of a summary reduces material in an original work to its main points and key supporting details. A summary may consist of a word, a phrase, several sentences, or one or more paragraphs. Usually a summary is one or two paragraphs. This paragraph or paragraphs will include a statement of the main idea of the article (the thesis statement) and refer to the major points that support the main idea.

A report (which may also be called a review) usually contains two sections: a summary of the material and a statement of the report writer's reaction to the material. If you are the report writer, the reaction is your own evaluation of the article—whether you liked or disliked it and why, whether you thought it was good or not and why, and/or whether you found the information interesting and useful or not and why. (In technical writing, there are different types of reports. If you are doing technical writing, you will need to know the different kinds. Refer to a good technical writing text or manual or the style sheet of the company for which you prepare the report.)

To write a **SUMMARY** well, and relatively painlessly, follow the steps below:

1. Read the selection carefully, re-reading as much as necessary.

2. In your own words, write a summary of the selection.

- A. At the top of the page, give the bibliographic information for the selection. Use the MLA format unless otherwise instructed. (See **DOCUMENTATION**.)
- B. The first line of the summary section should repeat the name of the selection and the author.
- C. The summary should convey your understanding of the main idea (thesis) of the selection and the major points used in developing this idea OR the major events in the short story or novel.
- D. Usually confine the summary of an article to one paragraph. (See **PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT**.) This may seem brief, but a summary has one purpose—to summarize.
- E. A summary should not exceed one-fourth of the length of the selection being summarized. Be skeptical of any summary which seems to require more than a page and a half.
- F. Phrases or clauses quoted from the selection should be in quotation marks.
- G. Do NOT include your opinion of the selection or your own knowledge of the subject in the summary paragraph. (This information belongs in the reaction paragraph of a **REPORT**—not in a summary.)

Specialized Forms of Writing

EXAMPLE (summary of an article/essay):

Trillin, Calvin. "It's Just Too Late." The Bedford Reader. 2nd ed. Ed. X. J. Kennedy and Dorothy M. Kennedy. New York: St. Martin's, 1985. 45-56.

Trillin's "It's Just Too Late" is an account of a sixteen-year-old girl's death. FaNee Cooper is the "perfect child" who, at thirteen, is discovered no longer perfect. She turns to alcohol and drugs and the people who use these substances. One night her father, wanting to take her from the company of one of her friends, chases her in a car. The car FaNee is riding in is wrecked. FaNee dies; the boy driving is convicted of involuntary manslaughter.

EXAMPLE (summary of an article/essay):

Etzioni, Amitai. "Parenting as an Industry." The McGraw-Hill Reader. 7th ed. Ed. Gilbert H. Muller. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1997. 106-12.

In Amitai Etzioni's essay "Parenting as an Industry," Etzioni analyzes the woeful condition of parenting. He says the condition is a result of increased numbers of parents leaving "the nest" to seek careers outside the home. Etzioni believes the lack of quality and quantity time parents have to offer their children is resulting in insufficient bonding and education. In turn, these children will have difficulty growing into well-adjusted adults. In addition, Etzioni discusses the growing numbers of children being placed in child care centers and the failure of these centers to give children the quality care they require because of understaffing and poorly paid, unqualified personnel. Because of these conditions, the turn-over rate at child care centers is very high, making bonding between child and caregiver difficult. Etzioni expresses concern about whether parents should trust strangers to raise their children and form their personalities. Furthermore, Etzioni suggests that parents become more responsible in selecting child care and remain involved after placement. Etzioni recommends increased government supervision of centers and home facilities and financial assistance for parents struggling to afford quality care for their children. In conclusion, Etzioni asks the reader the following question: What is most important in our country—making more money in pursuit of the "American Dream" or striving to be effective nurturing parents to our children?

For a **SHORT STORY SUMMARY**, see the **SUMMARY OF "YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN"** in the section on **WRITING IN RESPONSE TO LITERATURE**.