Summarizing

Some professors may ask you to summarize articles. But even when it’s not required, summarizing textbook chapters, essays, and journal articles can enhance your reading and can be excellent test preparation.

Summarizing involves expressing the reading in your own words, without altering the author's meaning. It requires processing what you read. Instead of just reading and highlighting, which can sometimes be passive, an active reader pauses periodically to summarize. The best way to summarize is to ask, “What is the author really saying?” What main points does the author convey?”

Understanding difficult words or unfamiliar references is essential for an accurate summary. Use a dictionary when needed, or ask others if you’re not sure what a reference means. If the author expresses an opinion, be sure to capture that opinion, even if you disagree with it.

HOW TO SUMMARIZE A PARAGRAPH

- Read the paragraph. Then read it again.
- Look for the topic sentence. It conveys the main point of the paragraph.
- Underline key phrases that support the main idea.
- Notice the structure of the paragraph. For example, are two points being compared? Contrasted? Is the author trying to prove the main idea through examples?
- Write your summary, using the key phrases and reflecting the structure of the paragraph.

HOW TO SUMMARIZE AN ARTICLE

- Consider why the article was written and who it was written for.
- What is the author’s background? Does the author have a particular point of view?
- Read the first and last paragraphs closely. Does the last paragraph expand on the first paragraph?
- Now read the entire article.
- Then read it again, underlining key phrases that support the main idea. Notice repeated phrases.
- Write a summary that captures the author’s main idea broadly enough to include most supporting details.

HOW TO SUMMARIZE A COMPLEX ARTICLE

- Preview the article before you read. Look at headings and first sentences.
- Be sure you know the meaning of any unfamiliar terms or references.
- Read the first and last paragraphs before reading the article.
- Read the article at least twice.
- Locate each important point as you read and write it down, in a full sentence.
- State the thesis of the article in one sentence.
- Determine the relationship between the thesis of the article and the main points that develop it. Consider the structure of the article, such as compare-contrast, cause-effect, or problem-solution.
- Now write your summary, starting with the author’s thesis. Then explain the author’s main points. Reflect how the author developed the thesis (compare-contrast, cause-effect, or problem-solution).

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