Summary

What is a Summary?

If you have described a movie to a friend who hasn’t seen it yet or explained to a classmate what he missed last class, then you have likely summarized before. When we write a summary, we take the ideas of another person, choose the most important ones, and put them into our own words so that our reader can have a good idea of what the original text is about. A summary, therefore, is another person’s ideas put into your own words. The length of a summary may vary; for example, the summary of a book may be several pages long while the summary for an article may be one paragraph. The length of your summary often depends on the length of the work you are summarizing and the assignment details.

Helpful Hints for Writing Summaries

- Read the original text as many times as necessary to understand it well. You cannot write a summary of the main points unless you understand the meaning of what you are reading.
- Once you understand the text, underline or highlight the important points. These are the ones that you think represent the main, or most important, ideas.
- Organize the paragraphs of your summary around the main ideas of the original text. Each paragraph should explain the idea adequately as well as demonstrating how this idea fits into the original text overall.
- Writing a thesis for a summary is different from other essays. Rather than come up with your own idea on the topic, instead you should identify what is the thesis of the original author’s. For example you may write something like this: “Suarez argues that, unless serious steps are taken immediately, public funding for education will continue to fall.”
- A summary should be mostly your own words. Think back to how you summarize a movie for a friend. You wouldn’t quote the entire film line by line. At the same time, some lines may be so important that they have to be included (e.g. “No, I am your father!” or “I see dead people.”). Likewise, a summary should only quote the most important lines from the text, relying on your own words to paraphrase the rest. Remember to cite all quotations.
- Remember that if you are summarizing an article in which the author has written a strong opinion or is trying to be persuasive, then you must show the author’s point of view in your summary. Your opinion or point of view, however, should not be included in a summary.