

Writing a Formal Summary

Not only are formal summaries helpful for condensing information through the process of note-taking, but they also allow you to meaningfully incorporate the ideas of others into an academic paper.

What is a formal summary?

A formal summary is also known as a “stand-alone summary” because it provides all the information necessary to act “alone” or in place of the original work. This type of summary is a piece of writing often used when writing a college paper to show an instructor that you have read and understood the reading. Because summarizing requires you use your own words to write the overall main idea in a clear and organized way, a formal summary helps you actively process what you read.

What are the features of a formal or ‘stand-alone’ summary?

- This type of summary clearly identifies the original work, including type of work, title, author and year written. The formal summary covers all the important points from the original source and is usually written in the present tense.
- A formal summary never includes any of your own ideas or opinions.
- As this piece of writing is for academic purposes, it is often useful to include “summarizing language.” At various points in your summary, remind your reader that this is summary by using phrases such as “the article claims,” “the author suggests” and other like phrases.

A Six Step Approach to Writing a Formal Summary

Step 1: Actively read the text. Annotate and Highlight.

Annotating and highlighting the text while looking for the main idea is the best way to understand a reading well. Remember to use the SQ3R method and survey the entire text first. Text features, such as title, subtitle, headings and subheadings, are often clues to how an article is organized.

Step 2: Identify the author’s main idea and major supporting points.

Look for clues to finding the main idea and major supporting details. Continue to annotate and highlight these main points as you find them. An author may use headings and subheadings to organize key points; be sure to paraphrase the ideas.

- How to find the main idea with a passage that has a **stated main idea**:
If the main idea is stated in a sentence, it is called the *thesis* (topic sentence). Locating the thesis or topic sentence in a passage is the easiest and most efficient to find the main idea. *List words* and *number clues* also help locate the main idea because they indicate where and how many major supporting details support the main idea.

List Words and Number Clues

advantages	four main functions	methods	five steps
categories	six key goals	three points	types
causes	groups	reasons	six varieties
factors	eight kinds	stages	ways

- How to find the main idea with a passage that has an implied main idea:

If an article does not have a *thesis statement* (central main idea stated) finding the major supporting details will help you to come up with the central main idea. Often transition words are clues to the major supporting details.

Note: Only include a minor detail if it is essential for understanding the main idea. If the passage is about a key concept or theory, and the minor detail is the definition of that key concept, then include it.

Step 3: Organize paraphrased main points into an outline or concept map.

Once you have identified the main points, create an outline or concept map to visually organize the main idea and major supporting points. Be sure to paraphrase these points by using your annotations.

Step 4: Use transition words to combine main points into a clear and unified summary.

Using your outline or concept: write your summary. Include one sentence to put the main idea of the entire passage in your own words, followed by one sentence for each of the major details using transition words to make the summary flow and read clearly.

Step 5: Include an introductory sentence with author tag and source information.

The first sentence should provide the author and title of the article, as well as a clear restatement of the main idea. That is, in a single sentence, tell your reader what the article is called, who wrote it, and what the author is trying to say. Use your own words. When you write about someone else's ideas or facts, you must clearly give credit them, or you may be plagiarizing.

Sample Introductory Sentence:

According to John Smith (2015), author of *Pocahontas is My Love*, Native American women value a deep spiritual connection to the environment.

Start your summary with a *frame* of the following elements:

- the title of the article
- the author's full name
- the year the article was written
- a reporting verb* that introduces the main idea

*A **reporting verb** is a verb (such as *says or states*) used to report information that has been said or written, and lets the reader know the information is quoted or paraphrased. See the list of suggested reporting verbs.

Sample Frames for Introductory Sentences

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to _____ (author's name) _____ (year), author of " _____ (title of article) ," _____ (main idea) _____ . • In his/her article " _____ (title of article) ," _____ (author) _____ (year) _____ (reporting verb) _____ (main idea/argument) _____ . • _____ (author's name) 's article " _____ (title of article) " _____ (year) _____ (reporting verb) _____ (main idea) _____ . • _____ (author's name) _____ (year), in his/her article, " _____ (title of article) " _____ (reporting verb) _____ (main idea) _____ .
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Choosing Reporting Verbs Carefully

Before selecting a verb it is important that you carefully read the source and clearly understand the author's main point or argument. When you choose a verb, ask yourself whether it is really what the author intended. You must make sure that you report others' work accurately.

Consider how strong of an argument the author makes of his or her point in the article. Then find the closest reporting verb that fits the author's attitude. If an author is simply providing information, then a neutral verb might be a good choice.

Below is a table of other useful reporting verbs that you might use with citations.

Function and strength	Example verbs
NEUTRAL: These verbs are most often used in summaries to say what the writer describes in factual terms.	articulates, assumes, believes, concludes, defines, demonstrates, describes, discovers, discusses, evaluates, explains, examines, finds, highlights, identifies, indicates, lists, mentions, notes, observes, outlines, points out, reports, reveals, shows, states, studies, suggests, takes into consideration, thinks, writes
WEAK: These verbs are used to say that the writer suggests or speculates on a topic (without being absolutely certain).	hypothesizes, implies, intimates, poses the view that, postulates, proposes, questions the view that, recommends, speculates, suggests
STRONG: These verbs are used to say that the writer makes strong arguments and claims for the main idea.	argues, asserts, challenges, claims, contends, denies, emphasizes, maintains, negates, refutes, rejects, supports the view that, strongly counters the view/argument that, theorizes

Step 6: Check summary against original. Revise as needed.

Target your draft for approximately 1/4 the length of the original. This means edits or deletions of repetitive words and ideas. Less is more in a summary. Note loosely constructed sentences and revise for accuracy. It is helpful to keep the same order of points from the original so reread your notes and make sure your overall main idea is clear and restates the author's main points in the same order. Check to see if it all makes sense and for length. Make sure you are clearly giving credit of ideas and facts to the author of your source to distinguish them from your own ideas.

Once you believe your summary is pretty much together, it would be ideal to ask someone to read it critically. See if your reader understands the basic points of the article after reading your summary. After making the necessary changes, edit and proofread. Ideally, give yourself time before handing in your paper. At the end you should have a well-written and accurate summary.

Example of Writing a Formal Summary

Original Passage

"Slimness vs. Cardiovascular Fitness: Which is More Crucial?"

Researchers have long debated whether it's healthier to be slim or physically fit. One recent study conducted at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston examined data on 38,000 women 45 and older, whose weight, height, and physical activity were recorded for about seven years. The researchers found that women who were overweight were three times more likely than normal-weight women to develop diabetes. Even walking four or more hours per week did not lower the overweight women's risk of getting diabetes. In another study by the University of Florida, researchers examined 906 women who had been tested for possible heart problems. They found that an obese woman who was physically fit, with a strong cardiovascular system, had a low risk of developing heart disease. But they also discovered that a slim woman who was not physically fit had a relatively high risk of developing heart disease.

(Source of information: Anita Manning, "Slimness vs. Cardiovascular Fitness: Which is More Crucial?" *USA Today*, September 8, 2004, p. 90.)



Steps 1-2

(Implied Main Idea)

**Research shows woman who don't want health risk – need to be slim / fit*

- *Overweight- 3x likely to get diabetes, but even if walk, risk not lowered*
- *Opposite- obese fit, and low risk of heart disease / slim woman not fit, high risk*

"Slimness V. Cardiovascular Fitness: Which is More Critical?"

Researchers have long debated whether it's healthier to be slim or physically fit. One recent study conducted at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston examined data on 38,000 women 45 and older, whose weight, height, and physical activity were recorded for about seven years. The researchers found that women who were overweight were three times more likely than normal-weight women to develop diabetes. Even walking four or more hours per week did not lower the overweight women's risk of getting diabetes. In another study by the University of Florida, researchers examined 906 women who had been tested for possible heart problems. They found that an obese woman who was physically fit, with a strong cardiovascular system, had a low risk of developing heart disease. But they also discovered that a slim woman who was not physically fit had a relatively high risk of developing heart disease. (Source of information: Anita Manning, "Slimness vs. Cardiovascular Fitness: Which is More Crucial?" *USA Today*, September 8, 2004, p. 9D.)

Major Supporting Detail #1

Major Supporting Detail #2



Step 3

Outline	Concept Map
<p>I. Some research suggests that women who want to avoid certain major health risks may need to stay slim as well as fit.</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">A. Overweight women were three times likely to develop diabetes than normal weight. However, even if they walked, this did not help lower this risk.</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">B. Obese woman who was fit had low risk of heart disease, but found slim woman who was not fit had high risk.</p>	<div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 20px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">Some research suggests that women who want to avoid certain major health risks may need to stay slim as well as fit.</div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; gap: 20px; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 10px; width: 45%;">Overweight women were three times likely to develop diabetes than normal weight. However, even if they walked, this did not help lower this risk.</div> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 10px; width: 45%;">Obese woman who was fit had low risk of heart disease, but found slim woman who was not fit had high risk.</div> </div> </div>



Step 4

Some research suggests that women who want to avoid certain major health risks may need to stay slim as well as fit. **Studies found** ~~Overweight~~ **obese and slim** women were **both** likely to ~~develop diabetes than~~ normal weight. ~~However, even if they walked, this did not help lower this risk. Obese woman who~~ **have health problems if they were not fit** [.] ~~was fit had low risk of heart disease, but found slim woman who was not fit had high risk.~~



Step 5-6

In the article “Slimness vs. Cardiovascular Fitness: Which is More Crucial?” (2004), Anita Manning **suggests** ~~Some research suggests~~ that women who want to avoid certain major health risks may need to stay slim as well as fit. **Studies found** obese and slim women were both likely to have health problems if they were not fit. *reporting verb*



Formal Summary

In the article “Slimness vs. Cardiovascular Fitness: Which is More Crucial?” (2004), Anita Manning suggests women who want to avoid certain major health risks may need to stay slim as well as fit. Studies found obese and slim women were both likely to have health problems if they were not fit or slim.