

Writing an Informal Summary

Writing an informal summary is a useful reading and study technique that will aid you in becoming a better, more active reader by helping you better understand the ideas of others. The result is a valuable skill that is not only important for academic courses but in any profession that values written communication. Often there will be value in presenting difficult and detailed material into writing that is clear, brief and easily understood.

What is an informal summary?

An informal summary is a simple reading and study technique in which the reader states the author's most important points in shortened form using his or her own words.

What Can I Summarize?

You can summarize just about anything.

- lectures
- presentations
- textbooks
- online materials
- video clips/audio clips
- workshops
- essays
- journal articles, etc.

Why Create an Informal Summary?

By creating an informal summary, you are able to not only show your instructor you have read and understood something, but this type of summary:

- Provides a strategy to become a better and more critical reader. A summary requires to you to actively look for the most important points and decide what's most important in order to retell the main idea clearly and in a way that makes sense.
- Helps you get a clear understanding of the reading. By having to write in your own words what you have read, you will need to make sure you have understood the reading.
- Provides you with your own notes for study. Since an informal summary is written in your own words, these are the notes that will clearly mean something to you and that you can use to recall the information for later use.

What should I include in an informal summary?

- Only include the author's main idea and major supporting details. These main points should be written in your own words.
- It is important when you paraphrase to keep the author's original meaning and emphasis, so choosing wording that doesn't add or subtract to the meaning is very important.
- Lastly, the length of the summary needs to be shorter than the original. A good rule of thumb is to keep the summary at approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ the length of the original.

An informal summary does NOT include the following:

- Do not include information that is not included in the original.
- Do not change the author's meaning or emphasis of the original idea. Even a word or lack of a word can change a meaning or add the level of importance placed on a main idea.
- Do not add your own commentary about the text. Leave any of your personal opinions or feelings about the text out of the summary. Only the author's opinion be included.

A Five Step Approach to Writing an Informal 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 most important 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, but do not simply use these in place of your own words; paraphrase the ideas in the margins.

- 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* or *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 a passage 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: Check your summary against original. Revise as needed.

To make sure the overall main idea is clear and restates the author's main ideas, it is helpful to compare it the original. Target your final summary for approximately 1/4 the length of the original. This means edit or delete repetitive words and ideas. Less is more in a summary. It is helpful to make sure you keep the order main idea so reread your notes and make sure your overall main idea is clear and restates the author's main points.

Example of Writing an Informal Summary

Original Passage

Choosing a Career

Most teenagers and young adults do not know what they want to do for the rest of their lives. It is a big decision. There are a number of things you can do to narrow the choices. For example you can take an interest test. This allows you to figure out what you are personally interested in and if your personality fits the job. Also, do some research on your own about a career. Finding out about a job is the best way to find out what you will be doing on the job. Try volunteer work in the field in which you are interested, this way you get actual experience of the job itself. Lastly, "job-shadow", in which you spend a day with a person who is working in a field that interests you. These are just a few helpful ideas as you begin to choose a career.

Steps 1-2

marginal notes

- *many things you can do to choose a type of job*
- *Take an interest test*
- *Research on career*
- *Volunteer*
- *Job shadow*

Choosing a Career

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** main idea*

major supporting details

Step 3

Outline

I. There are many things a person can do to help themselves choose a job.

A. Take a test that will tell you what you are interested in.

B. Find out what you will do in this job by researching.

C. Volunteer in the job to see what it's like.

D. See what the job is like by spending a day with a person that works in that career.

There are many things a person can do to help themselves choose a job.

Take a test that will tell you what you are interested in.

Find out what you will do in this job by researching.

Volunteer in the job to see what it's like.

See what the job is like by spending a day with a person that works in that career.

Step 4-5

There are many things a person can do to help themselves choose a job *career*. **For example**, take an *interest test* ~~a test that will tell you about what you are interested in~~, ~~find out about what you will do in this job by researching~~ [,] *research* ~~to find out about the job~~, ~~volunteer in the job to see what's like~~, *and* ~~see what the job is like by spending a day with a person that works in that career~~.

Informal Summary

There are many things a person can do to help themselves choose a career. For example, take an interest test, research, volunteer, and spend a day with a person that works in that career.