

How should I approach writing a summary?

Writing a summary is an important skill for students and professionals at every level. An instructor may assign you to summarize articles, books, and other sources, or the summary might make up part of a larger assignment. A well-written summary displays that you understand a source and can relate it to other sources and your own work.

Good summaries focus on the relevant information from the source text and present that information in an accurate and concise manner. Avoid simply repeating original sources; this gives off the impression that you do not fully understand your sources, and risks plagiarizing them. Instead, try to paraphrase their ideas using your own words.

While literature reviews also involve pulling relevant information from outside sources, they are a distinct genre of writing. For more information, see the GWC tip sheet on Literature Reviews.

How long should a summary be?

A summary's length depends on a few factors. First, consider specific instructions for the assignment, making sure to meet your professor's specifications. If the summary is part of a larger assignment, determine how much background information is necessary. Do you need to explain an author's research methods or experimental setup, or can you simply mention their results? If you are unsure, consider asking your instructor.

What should I focus on when paraphrasing another source?

Use your own words whenever possible. Rearrange the grammar of a sentence and replace some words with synonyms.

Original: HeLa cells are an essential component for many studies on genetics, human tissues, and virology.

Paraphrase: A wide array of biological research depends on HeLa cells.

Note that this example does not paraphrase one key term: Hela cells. Technical terms and specialized vocabulary have precise meanings, so they should not be changed. Similarly, you may want to consider directly quoting a definition because using synonyms may distort its meaning.

For help on quotations and avoiding plagiarism, see the GWC tip sheets on the subjects.

Should I mention the original author by name?

Using information from another author without giving them credit may constitute plagiarism, so you should be sure to mention each source at least once. In APA style, this is done by citing an author's last name and the year a source was published. These citations can be incorporated into your summary:

Swales and Feak (2008) note that ...

According to the CDC (2020), ...

Labov's (2001) research suggests that ...

Other useful verbs might include *describe*, *propose*, *show*, *report*, *find*, or *argue*. For longer summaries, you may want to mention the author several times.

Deming (1993) goes on to explain ...

Kim (2005) concludes that...