Chapter 5: Writing a Summary and Synthesizing

5.1 Writing Summaries
Melanie Gagich

What is a summary?

A summary is a comprehensive and objective restatement of the main ideas of a text (an article, book, movie, event, etc.) Stephen Wilhoit, in his textbook *A Brief Guide to Writing from Readings*, suggests that keeping the qualities of a good summary in mind helps students avoid the pitfalls of unclear or disjointed summaries. These qualities include:

Neutrality – The writer avoids inserting his or her opinion into the summary, or interpreting the original text's content in any way. This requires that the writer avoids language that is evaluative, such as: good, bad, effective, ineffective, interesting, boring, etc. Also, keep "I" out of the summary; instead, summary should be written in grammatical 3rd person (For example: "he", "she", "the author", "they", etc).

Brevity – The summary should not be longer than the original text, but rather highlight the most important information from that text while leaving out unnecessary details while still maintaining accuracy.

Independence – The summary should make sense to someone who has not read the original source. There should be no confusion about the main content and organization of the original source. This also requires that the summary be accurate.

By mastering the craft of summarizing, students put themselves in the position to do well on many assignments in college, not just English essays. In most fields (from the humanities to the soft and hard sciences) summary is a required task. Being able to summarize lab results accurately and briefly, for example, is critical in a chemistry or engineering class. Summarizing the various theories of sociology or education helps a person apply them to his or her fieldwork. In college, it's imperative we learn how to summarize well because we are asked to do it so often.

College students are asked to summarize material for many different types of assignments. In some instances, summarizing one source is often the sole purpose of the entire assignment. Students might also be asked to summarize as just one aspect of a larger project, such as a literature review, an abstract in a research paper, or a works consulted entry in an annotated bibliography.

Some summary assignments will expect students to condense material more than others. For example, when summary is the sole purpose of the assignment, the student might be asked to include key supporting evidence, where as an abstract might require students to boil down the source text to its bare-bones essentials.

What Makes Something a Summary?

When you ask yourself, after reading an article (and maybe even reading it two or three times), "What was that article about?" and you end up jotting down– from memory, without returning to the original article to use its language or phrases–three things that stood out as the author's main points, you are summarizing. Summaries have several key characteristics.

You're summarizing well when you

- use your own words significantly condense the original text
- provide accurate representations of the main points of the text they summarize
- avoid personal opinion.

Summaries are much shorter than the original material—a general rule is that they should be no more than 10% to 15% the length of the original, and they are often even shorter than this.

It can be easy and feel natural, when summarizing an article, to include our own opinions. We may agree or disagree strongly with what this author is saying, or we may want to compare their information with the information presented in another source, or we may want to share our own opinion on the topic. Often, our opinions slip into summaries even when we work diligently to keep them separate. These opinions are not the job of a summary, though. A summary should *only* highlight the main points of the article.

Focusing on just the ideas that best support a point we want to make or ignoring ideas that don't support that point can be tempting. This approach has two significant problems, though:

First, it no longer correctly represents the original text, so it misleads your reader about the ideas presented in that text. A summary should give your reader an accurate idea of what they can expect if we pick up the original article to read.

Second, it undermines your own credibility as an author to not represent this information accurately. If readers cannot trust an author to accurately represent source information, they may not be as likely to trust that author to thoroughly and accurately present a reasonable point.

How Should I Organize a Summary?

Like traditional essays, summaries have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. What these components look like will vary some based on the purpose of the summary you're writing. The introduction, body, and conclusion of work focused specifically around summarizing something is going to be a little different than in work where summary is not the primary goal.

Introducing a Summary

One of the trickier parts of creating a summary is making it clear that this is a summary of someone else's work; these ideas are not your original ideas. You will almost always begin a summary with an introduction to the author, article, and publication so the reader knows what we are about to read. This information will appear again in your bibliography, but is also useful here so the reader can follow the conversation happening in your paper. You will want to provide it in both places.

In summary-focused work, this introduction should accomplish a few things:

- Introduce the name of the author whose work you are summarizing.
- Introduce the title of the text being summarized.
- Introduce where this text was presented (if it's an art installation, where is it being shown? If it's an article, where was that article published? Not all texts will have this component–for example, when summarizing a book written by one author, the

title of the book and name of that author are sufficient information for your readers to easily locate the work you are summarizing).

- State the main ideas of the text you are summarizing—just the big-picture components.
- Give context when necessary. Is this text responding to a current event? That might be important to know. Does this author have specific qualifications that make them an expert on this topic? This might also be relevant information.

So, for example, if you were to get an assignment asking you to summarize Matthew Hutson's *Atlantic* article, "Beyond the Five Senses" (found at www.theatlantic.com) an introduction for that summary might look something like this:

> In his July 2017 article in *The Atlantic*, "Beyond the Five Senses," Matthew Hutson explores ways in which potential technologies might expand our sensory perception of the world. He notes that some technologies, such as cochlear implants, are already accomplishing a version of this for people who do not have full access to one of the five senses. In much of the article, though, he seems more interested in how technology might expand the ways in which we sense things. Some of these technologies are based in senses that can be seen in nature, such as echolocation, and others seem more deeply rooted in science fiction. However, all of the examples he gives consider how adding new senses to the ones we already experience might change how we perceive the world around us.

However, you will probably find yourself more frequently using summary as just one component of work with a wide range of goals (not just a goal to "summarize X"). Summary introductions in these situations still generally need to

- name the author name the text being summarized state just the relevant context, if there is any (maybe the author has a specific credential that makes their work on this topic carry more weight than it would otherwise, or maybe the study they generated is now being used as a benchmark for additional research)
- introduce the author's full name (first and last names) the first time you summarize part of their text. If you summarize pieces of the same text more than

once in a work you are writing, each time you use their text after that initial introduction of the source, you will only use the author's last name as you introduce that next summary component.

Presenting the "Meat" (or Body) of a Summary

Again, this will look a little different depending on the purpose of the summary work you are doing. Regardless of how you are using summary, you will introduce the main ideas throughout your text with transitional phrasing, such as "One of [Author's] biggest points is…," or "[Author's] primary concern about this solution is…."

If you are responding to a "write a summary of X" assignment, the body of that summary will expand on the main ideas you stated in the introduction of the summary, although this will all still be very condensed compared to the original. What are the key points the author makes about each of those big-picture main ideas? Depending on the kind of text you are summarizing, you may want to note how the main ideas are supported (although, again, be careful to avoid making your own opinion about those supporting sources known).

When you are summarizing with an end goal that is broader than just summary, the body of your summary will still present the idea from the original text that is relevant to the point you are making (condensed and in your own words).

Since it is much more common to summarize just a single idea or point from a text in this type of summarizing (rather than all of its main points), it is important to make sure you understand the larger points of the original text. For example, you might find that an article provides an example that opposes its main point in order to demonstrate the range of conversations happening on the topic it covers. This opposing point, though, isn't the main point of the article, so just summarizing this one opposing example would not be an accurate representation of the ideas and points in that text.

Concluding a Summary

For writing in which summary is the sole purpose, here are some ideas for your conclusion.

- Now that we've gotten a little more information about the main ideas of this piece, are there any connections or loose ends to tie up that will help your reader fully understand the points being made in this text? This is the place to put those.
- This is also a good place to state (or restate) the things that are most important for your readers to remember after reading your summary.
- Depending on your assignment, rather than providing a formal concluding paragraph where you restate the main points and make connections between them, you may want to simply paraphrase the author's concluding section or final main idea. Check your assignment sheet to see what kind of conclusion your instructor is asking for.

When your writing has a primary goal other than summary, your conclusion should

- discuss the summary you've just presented. How does it support, illustrate, or give new information about the point you are making in your writing? Connect it to your own main point for that paragraph so readers understand clearly why it deserves the space it takes up in your work. (Note that this is still not giving your opinion on the material you've summarized, just making connections between it and your own main points.)

5.2 Synthesizing in Your Writing
Yvonne Bruce, Melanie Gagich, and Svetlana Zhuravlova

Synthesis as Conversation Among the Authors of Your Source Materials

To **synthesize** is to combine ideas and create a completely *new* idea. That new idea becomes the conclusion you have drawn from your reading. This is the true beauty of reading: it causes us to weigh ideas, to compare, judge, think, and explore—and then to arrive at a moment that we hadn't known before. We begin with simple **summary**, work through **analysis**, evaluate using **critique**, and then move on to **synthesis**.

How do you synthesize?

Synthesis is a common skill we practice all the time when we converse with others on topics we have different levels of knowledge and feeling about. When you argue with

your friends or classmates about a controversial topic like abortion or affirmative action or gun control, your overall understanding of the topic grows as you incorporate their ideas, experiences, and points of view into a broader appreciation of the complexities involved. In professional and academic writing, synthesizing requires you to seek out this kind of multi-leveled understanding through reading, research, and discussion. Though, in academic writing, this is another kind of discussion: you set the goal for the discussion, organize the discussion among the authors of your found researched materials, orchestrate the progress of the discussion, provide comments and build logical guidance for your audience (readers of your Synthesis Essay), and finally you draw your conclusion on the topic.

Below are some steps you can use to help you synthesize research:

1. Determine the goal(s) for your discussion such as reviewing a topic or supporting an argument
2. Organize the discussion among the authors of your found researched materials
3. Lead the discussion among the authors of your sources
4. Provide comments and build logical guidance for your audience
5. Summarize the most vivid of the authors' examples and explanations
6. Finally, draw your unique conclusion on the topic: in fact, the answer to your research question

See Appendix B for examples

What synthesis is NOT

Synthesizing does not mean summarizing everyone's opinion: "Julia is pro-life, and Devon is pro-choice, and Jasmine says she thinks women should be able to have abortions if their life is in danger or they've been the victims of rape or incest."
Synthesizing does not mean critiquing opinions: "Rick tried to defend affirmative action, but everyone knows it's really reverse racism."
Synthesizing does not simply comparative texts (unless assigned as such by your instructor). You are neither evaluating nor comparing the effectiveness of the authors' presentations.

What synthesis IS

Instead, synthesis demonstrates YOUR full, objective, empathetic understanding of a topic from multiple perspectives. When you synthesize, you "cook" the ideas and opinions of others by thinking, talking, and writing about them, and what comes out is a dish full of many blended flavors but uniquely your recipe: "Because feelings about gun control are so strong on all sides, and because outlawing semi-automatic weapons will not solve the problem of illegal handguns that are implicated in most gun crimes in the United States, any solution to the problem of our gun violence will likely require greater efforts to reduce illegal weapons, greater responsibility taken by gun manufacturers, and better enforcement of existing legislation rather than new legislation or constitutional change."

Notice that this synthesis does not crouch behind limited and thoughtless positions: "You can't change the Second Amendment!" "Ban all guns!" This synthesis instead tries to depict hard reality: guns are an integral part of American culture, and so is gun violence, and limiting the latter cannot be done without impacting the former. This synthesis reserves judgment and aims for understanding.

5.3 Make Connections When Synthesizing in Your Writing
Svetlana Zhuravlova, Yvonne Bruce, and Melanie Gagich

The previous section introduces you to the idea of synthesis as conversation, and you are given a definition of *synthesis* throughout this text, but how do you indicate synthesis in your writing? When you synthesize, you are responding to the voices and ideas of others, so you should be as flexible in your written response to them as you would be in a verbal response to those you were having a discussion with about a complex topic. Primarily, your synthesis will indicate agreement or disagreement with your sources, but it may also recognize patterns of thinking, errors in logic, or the omission of important points—whatever it is you are adding to the conversation.

Synthesis that adds to the conversation in other ways:

- While most of the experts on topic X see overfishing as the primary cause of species depletion, only Source D acknowledges that there may be other, environmental causes.
- When I began writing about topic X, I expected to learn reason Y. To my surprise, none of the sources address this reason, which leads me to believe that . . .
- Because Source A is the expert in the field of topic X, most others writing about X accede to A's authority, but a closer examination of A reveals an important omission about X.

Other Examples of Sentence Structures that Demonstrate Synthesis

Synthesis that indicates agreement/support:

- Source A asserts that…Yet Source B offers a different perspective by…
- Source C & B would likely disagree regarding…
- My view, however, contrary to what Source A has argued, is…
- I argue that X & Y are the best solution, though Source B offers a different option.
- In contrast, I would like to offer some objections to the opinions expressed by source C…
- While source A makes an intriguing argument, I would disagree…

What the above examples indicate is that synthesis is the careful weaving in of outside opinions in order to show your reader the many ideas and arguments on your topic and further assert your own. Notice, too, that the above examples are also *signal phrases*: language that introduces outside source material to be either quoted or paraphrased. See section 11.4 for more information on signal phrases.

Remember that you are working with multiple sources, so it is important to remember the following:

Consider your audience: they are intelligent readers, most likely belong to academic environment; however, they are not familiar with all your source-materials, so they rely

upon your presentation to get the meaning of the information you have retrieved from your research. Make it clear to your audience what information is taken from which of your sources.

5.4 Informative vs. Argumentative Synthesis
Svetlana Zhuravlova

In academic research and writing, synthesizing of the information from the obtained available resources results in novelty, discovery, reaching to the common sense on a debatable issue, clarifying the perplexity of the subject under the discussion, or making the point on a controversial topic. Your rhetorical goal for writing a synthesis essay will be identified by the given assignment. In your
First-Year Writing courses, you may write an Informative/Explanatory Synthesis and/or an Argumentative Synthesis

What is an Informative/Explanatory Synthesis?

In informative writing, you are explaining the discussion points and topics to your readers without taking a position of one side or another, without showing your opinion. Even if the topic is debatable and highly controversial, instead of promoting your personal opinion, you have to objectively introduce the ideas of others, explain and show how their information is related to each other's, how the information may connect and diverge. You are not showing your agreement with some authors and disagreement with the others. You should stay neutral both in your comments on the found information and in your conclusions reached at the end of the discussion.

Example:

Numerous authors wonder if this is a natural progression over time because of the laws that have changed or a shift in ideals that redefine what free speech is supposed to be… Author N believes that [free speech] is not controlled enough in the interest of the people, while Authors B and D believe that, in an ideal world, opinions would be formed and spoken without repercussion and merely be a part of language…

At the end of the discussion, draw *your neutral conclusion* on the topic:

Example: The question if speech has become limited, affecting the right to freedom of speech, lies in the hands of the people and the justice system itself.

What is Argumentative Synthesis?

Everything you learned about Argumentative Writing in chapters of this textbook is true and valid for writing an Argumentative Synthesis. The main difference may be that you are to support your ideas with evidence found in multiple sources, show and explain how the authors' opinions relate, who of your authors agree and who disagree on the controversial issue, while your comments on the information retrieved from these sources and your conclusions will clarify *your own position* in the debate.

First, you start the debate with the assertion that sets the goal for the debate, its controversy:

Example: Societal changes are a large part in the debate of free speech and its limitations. The debate is about whether offensive speech should be punished when it is said with the intent to psychologically harm a group or person, or if immoral or scandalous speech should be off-limits.

Then, you are moderating the debate among the experts

- Professor of Law E disagrees…
- His thought is echoed by Professor R from the University of …
- Authors F and S also discuss and assess…
- Following in their steps, Authors D and T express…
- Unfortunately, in opposition to their respect, Author X asserts that…
- This brings us back to the view point of Authors F and S, who argue that…

Finally, conclude the discussion and finalize your position:

Thus, hateful and immoral speech – which typically associates itself with low-value because of harmful words – will continue to find its limitations in the world even if it is not through government operations…

When you synthesize, you are a part of the discussion and a leader of the discussion that you have initiated. You are introducing the voices and ideas of others, so you should be flexible and fair to all participating authors. You should avoid personal attack, as well as other logical fallacies in your comments on the information borrowed from your source materials.

5.5 Synthesis and Literature Reviews
Literature Reviews : Synthesis and Research

Why do we seek to understand the ways that authors or sources "converse" with one another? So that we can **synthesize** various perspectives on a topic to more deeply understand it.

In academic writing, this understanding of the "conversation" may become the content of an explanatory synthesis paper – a paper in which you, the writer, point out various themes or key points from a conversation on a particular topic. Notice that the example of synthesis in "What Synthesis Is" acknowledges that guns and gun control inspire passionate responses in Americans, that more than one kind of weapon is involved in gun violence, that guns in America are both legally and illegally owned, and that there are many constituencies whose experience with guns needs to considered if sound gun control policy is to be achieved. The writer of this synthesis isn't "pretending" to be objective ("Although gun violence is a problem in American today, people who want to increase gun control clearly don't understand the Second Amendment"); nor is the writer arguing a point or attempting to persuade the audience to accept one perspective. The writer is making a claim about gun control that demonstrates his or her deepest understanding of the issue.

Another assignment that you may complete that also applies your synthesis skills is a **literature review**. Literature reviews are often found in the beginning of scholarly journal articles to contextualize the author's own research. Sometimes, literature reviews are done for their own sake; some scholarly articles are *just* Literature reviews. Literature reviews (sometimes shortened to "lit reviews") synthesize previous research that has been done on a particular topic, summarizing important works in the history of research on that topic. The literature review provides context for the author's own new research. It is the basis and background out of which the author's research grows. Context = credibility in academic writing. When writers are able to produce a literature review, they demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge about how others have already studied and discussed their topic.

- Literature reviews are most often **arranged by topic or theme**, much like a traditional explanatory synthesis paper.

- If one is looking at a topic that has a long history of research and scholarship, one may conduct a **chronological** literature review, one that looks at how the research topic has been studied and discussed in various time periods (i.e., what was published ten years ago, five years ago, and within the last year, for example).
- Finally, in some instances, one might seek to craft a literature review that is organized **by discipline or field.** This type of literature review could offer information about how different academic fields have examined a particular topic (i.e., what is the current research being done by *biologists* on this topic? What is the current research being done by *psychologists* on this topic? What is the current research being done by [*insert academic discipline]* on this topic?).

A Literature Review offers *only* a report on what others have already written about. The Literature Review does not reflect the author's own argument or contributions to the field of research. Instead, it indicates that the author has read others' important contributions and understands what has come before him or her. Sometimes, literature reviews are stand alone assignments or publications. Sometimes, they fit into a larger essay or article (especially in many of the scholarly articles that you will read throughout college. For more information on how literature reviews are a part of scholarly articles, see chapter 10.5)