

Summarizing

When you summarize information, you explain the most important parts of a source text in your own words. You typically summarize something to make it shorter. The page number is not required in the in-text citation for a summary.

An effective summary—

- explains the most important parts of the original.
- is written in your own words.
- keeps the original meaning.
- does not merely cut and copy from the original.
- is shorter than the original.

Below is an excerpt from a website article that describes water pollution. This example will be used on the next several pages to illustrate how to write a summary.

Example Source

Clean freshwater is an essential ingredient for a healthy human life, but 1.1 billion people lack access to water and 2.4 billion don't have adequate sanitation. Water becomes polluted from toxic substances dumped or washed into streams and waterways and the discharge of sewage and industrial waste. These pollutants come in many forms—organic, inorganic, even radioactive—and can make life difficult, if not impossible, for humans, animals and other organisms alike. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/pollution> ("Impacts," 2018, "Water Pollution," para. 1)

Example: Summary

Organic, inorganic, and radioactive pollutants from various types of waste pollute water which complicates life for many living organisms that don't have clean water ("Impacts," 2018).

Here are some simple steps you can follow in order to create a summary:

1. Determine your purpose.
2. Read or listen to what you will summarize.
3. Make a list of the main points.
4. Write the summary.
5. Compare the summary to the original.

Determine your purpose

The purpose of your summary will help you determine which details you should include. Typically, your summaries for academic writing have a similar purpose: you need to explain academic information without your opinion. You may also have a more specific focus in mind that will help you decide which details are important and which details you should not include in your summary.

Read/listen

Read or listen carefully so you understand the source well enough to summarize it.

Make a list of the main points

As you read/listen, pay attention to the main ideas and major details of the source material. You should make a list of these main points either while you read/listen or just after. If you can write on the text, it may help to underline main points or cross out minor details. If you are summarizing a lecture, you can do something similar with your

lecture notes. As you write your list, focus on ideas rather than copying the exact words from the source. Compare the example paragraph and the example list below.

Example: Quote

Clean freshwater is an essential ingredient for a healthy human life, but 1.1 billion people lack access to water and 2.4 billion don't have adequate sanitation. Water becomes polluted from toxic substances dumped or washed into streams and waterways and the discharge of sewage and industrial waste. These pollutants come in many forms—organic, inorganic, even radioactive—and can make life difficult, if not impossible, for humans, animals and other organisms alike.

Example: List

- Many people don't have clean water.
- Toxic, human, and industrial waste pollutes water.
- Organic, inorganic, and radioactive pollutants complicate life for living organisms.

A lot of details were left off the list because they were not essential for the summary. Other ideas were combined (like the first clause and the last sentence). There is not one perfect way to make a list for your summary.

Write the summary

Without looking at/listening to the original, use your list to write your summary. Again, it is important to focus on the ideas. Use your own words to write your summary.

Example: List

- Many people don't have clean water.
- Toxic, human, and industrial waste pollutes water.
- Organic, inorganic, and radioactive pollutants complicate life for living organisms.

Example: Summary

Organic, inorganic, and radioactive pollutants from various types of waste pollute water which complicates life for many living organisms that don't have clean water ("Impacts," 2018).

Notice how the items on the list are not just copied and pasted together into one big sentence. The ideas are connected together carefully. The order is changed a little and some of the ideas are condensed.

Compare to the original

After you write your summary, you should compare it to the original. Make sure that the ideas have not been changed, but that the words/syntax are distinct. Make revisions as necessary.

Example: Quote

Clean freshwater is an essential ingredient for a healthy human life, but 1.1 billion people lack access to water and 2.4 billion don't have adequate sanitation. Water becomes polluted from toxic substances dumped or washed into streams and waterways and the discharge of sewage and industrial waste. These pollutants come in many forms—organic, inorganic, even radioactive—and can make life difficult, if not impossible, for humans, animals and other organisms alike.

Example: Summary

Organic, inorganic, and radioactive pollutants from various types of waste pollute water which complicates life for many living organisms that don't have clean water ("Impacts," 2018).

Exercise1 : Evaluate Summaries

Evaluate the summaries. Which summary is most effective? Identify features of the ineffective summaries that make them ineffective.

Original:

“Broadway is the bright beating heart of the NYC’s performing arts scene. No visit to the city is complete without experiencing the rousing entertainment available in Midtown Manhattan’s Theatre District, where dozens of historic venues stage bold new musicals, long-running hits and fascinating dramas every night of the week” (“Broadway Shows,” 2018, para. 1).

- A. Broadway is amazing because they have long-running hits on the historic stages every night (“Broadway Shows,” 2018).
- B. Visitors to New York City should not miss the exciting variety of live entertainment available on Broadway (“Broadway Shows,” 2018).
- C. Going to see one of the many amazing shows on Broadway is a definite highlight in the visit of any tourist to the thriving metropolis of New York City because it is full of historic theaters and fantastic entertainment (“Broadway Shows,” 2018).
- D. Broadway, the bright star of entertainment, might be a stop for many visitors because of its bold musicals, long-running hits and fascinating dramas (“Broadway Shows,” 2018, para. 1).

Exercise2: Write a summary

Choose one of the quotes to summarize. Follow the steps in this chapter as you write your summary.

1. "When water in the atmosphere mixes with certain chemicals—particularly sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides emitted during the burning of fossil fuels—mild acidic compounds are formed. This acid rain can leach toxic aluminum from the soil, which at low levels can stress fish in lakes and streams or, at higher concentrations, kill them outright. Acid rain also weakens trees in forests and contributes to air pollution that can harm humans" ("Impacts," 2018, "Acid Rain," para. 1)
2. "Great leaders are brave enough to face up to challenging situations and deal with them honestly. Whether it's steering through a business downturn or getting struggling employees back on track, effective leaders meet these challenges openly. Regular communications with your staff, informing them of both good news and how the company is reacting to challenges will go a long way toward making employees feel like you trust them and that they're unlikely to be hit with unpleasant surprises" (Moran, 2018, "Face Challenges," para. 1).
3. "Camouflage, also called cryptic coloration, is a defense or tactic that organisms use to disguise their appearance, usually to blend in with their surroundings. Organisms use camouflage to mask their location, identity, and movement. This allows prey to avoid predators, and for predators to sneak up on prey" (McDaniel, Sprout, Boudreau, & Turgeon, 2011, para. 1).
4. "Pidgins and creoles are both the result of what happens when you blend two or more languages, but they're not the same. Put simply, a pidgin is the first-generation version of a language that forms between native speakers of different languages — a makeshift communication bridge, if you will. A creole is a pidgin with native speakers, or one that's been passed down to a second generation of speakers who will formalize it and fortify the bridge into a robust structure with a fully developed grammar and syntax" (Koyfman, 2017, para. 3).