

WRT 205: Critical Research

Writing an Effective Summary

As we're learning, summary is an essential tool for critical research, as it enables you to be conversant with your sources, and not just turn to them for copy-and-paste quoting. In order to demonstrate your sources' validity and value to your reader, you need to be able to explain what they are and why they matter. Summary equips you to do that.

First off, let's consider what an effective summary is NOT:

- It is not simply a chronological play-by-play.
- It is not simply objective.

Instead, an effective summary

- Explains to your reader about the source's argument and purpose
- Reflects *your* purpose and perspective—you are *forwarding* this material from its original context into a new context
- Serves as a tool of analysis—helping you to better understand the source and then explain that understanding to others

Here's what all this means: too often, student writers provide a *list summary* of their source—a whole bunch of "and then" statements that give the reader a play-by-play of the author's topics, but no coherent sense of what the source actually *is* and what it *argues*. In that instance, the reader ends up with an inventory of the source's points, but no sense of its central claim. That means that the reader really doesn't understand the source, and consequently can't be sure how much to rely upon what it says.

Another point where summaries often go awry is that they don't seem to serve a particular purpose in the author's text—in other words, the author offers up a lot of other people's ideas, but without a sense of how they're relevant to his/her own point and purpose. Such summaries are often rushed—a pretty superficial drive-by look at the source—and rely on clichés that are often incomplete or even inaccurate. In these instances, the reader may not be certain that the author actually understands the source, and may not appreciate how it matters to what he/she has to say.

A good summary, by contrast, is focused to the author's own needs. Whatever the source you're working with, it's unlikely that its focus is exactly the same as yours and its argument exactly the same as yours (and that's good, because that would indicate you're not saying anything new). What that means, though, is that your purpose in working with that material isn't the same as the original author's, and so your summary of the text will prioritize different elements from the original. That's entirely permissible; so long as you can fairly represent the text, then you can hone in on what's important about it *for your purposes*.

Here is some advice on how to do that. First off, bear in mind that an effective summary will do what I just described above: it will look back (at the original source) and it will look ahead (at what you might do with said source). Furthermore, your summary will need to address two sets of concerns: rhetoric and content. In other words, you're going to need to be able to define what the source *is* AND what the source *says*.

First things first, defining a source: we need to know what this thing is, and that means you need to be able to explain to us something about the source's

- Aims—what is the author trying to do here? What position/issue is under consideration? Why?
- Methods—how does the author develop his/her ideas and connect them to one another? How does he/she go about making meaning?
- Materials—what kind of evidence/examples is the author working with?

All of these questions are about *how* the source works (the rhetoric of it), which you need to be able to understand in order to say you understand the source, which you need to be able to do in order to effectively use it. Most of the time, you will be able to handle this work in a few sentences. If it's a long piece you're working with and a long piece you're writing, it may take longer.

Next, of course, you need to be conversant with the ideas of the text, its content. Careful reading and note-taking is critical to this work. You need to read the source in its entirety (not just the abstract or the first page), and you need to read with a pen in your hand, jotting notes, questions, comments, responses, intersections, etc. Once you've read the whole source thoroughly, then give this a try:

- Presumably, you've identified certain portions of the source that are most relevant to your own work; read those parts again. You'll start there.
- Put the original aside, and write in your own words, without looking back at it. That's crucial to ensure that you are not simply borrowing chunks of language and sentence structure, but actually putting these ideas into your own writing.
- Compare your summary with the original to ensure that it is fair and accurate.

Wait, there's more!

- Your reader needs to know what you're summarizing—what this source is, not just a parenthetical reference at the end of the sentence, but an actual description of the source. You need to name it, too.
- AND your reader needs to know why you're using this source—once you've summarized the material, then you will need to interpret it for your reader and explain its significance to your larger project. Why should we care what this source has to say? Your evidence won't stand alone; you need to substantiate it.
- Even if you're focusing on a particular portion or point of the source, we need a sense of the overall text—you can often accomplish this in a phrase or two, or perhaps a couple of sentences; make sure you do it.

Remember, there's more than one way to make use of a source. There is a time to quote (when you really need the *language* of the original for some point that you're trying to make). There is a time to paraphrase—when you really need to capture the full *meaning* of a relatively brief passage but don't wish to quote it. And there is a time to summarize:

- when *what* the source has to say is more important than *how* it says it (content matters more than phrasing)
- when you need to cover multiple ideas that are spread throughout the original source
- when you need to offer some sense of the source as a whole (like, say, when you're quoting, but we need to know what this thing is you're quoting from)

In other words, these different methods often work together. You need them all in your toolbox.