

Summary

After reading this article, you should be able to distinguish between summary and analysis, and avoid inappropriate summary in your academic writing.

Is Summary a Bad Thing?

Not necessarily, but it's important to keep your assignment and audience in mind as you write. If your assignment requires an argument with a thesis statement and supporting evidence (most academic writing assignments do), then the amount of summary in your paper should be brief. Summaries provide background, set the stage, or illustrate supporting evidence, but only a few sentences should do the trick. Most of your paper should focus on your argument. (See our handout on arguments for additional information.)

Writing a summary of what you know about your topic before you start drafting your paper can sometimes be helpful. If you're unfamiliar with the material you're analyzing, try summarizing what you've read in order to understand the reading and get your thoughts in order. After you know a subject, it's easier to decide what you want to argue.

Try some other pre-writing activities that can help you develop your own analysis. Outlining, freewriting, and mapping make it easier to get your thoughts on the page (Check out our handout on brainstorming.).

Why Is It So Tempting to Stick with Summary and Skip Analysis?

Many writers rely heavily on summary because they can write it easily. For example, summarizing the plot of *The Great Gatsby* may be more appealing than staring at the computer

for three hours and wondering what to say about F. Scott Fitzgerald's use of color symbolism. If you don't really understand an author's argument, it seems easier to repeat what he or she said.

To write an analytical paper, try reviewing the text or film you're writing about, focusing on the elements that are relevant to your thesis. It may help to consider your writing assignment before reading, viewing, or listening to this material so that you're already keeping the prompt (and your professor's expectations) in mind.

How Do I know if I'm Summarizing?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is my paper stating something that would be obvious to the audience?**
- **Does my essay move through the plot, history, or author's argument in chronological order**, or in the exact same order the author used?
- **Does my paper describe *what* happens, *where* it happens, or *whom* it happens to?**

A "yes" to any of these questions may be a sign that you're summarizing. If you answer yes to the questions below, though, it's a sign that your paper may have more analysis (which is generally a good thing):

- **Am I making an original argument about the text?**
- **Have I arranged my evidence around my own points**, rather than following the author's or plot's order?
- **Am I explaining *why* or *how* an aspect of the text is significant?**

Keep an eye out for these warning signs of summary:

- “[*This essay*] is about...”
- “[*This book*] is the story of...”
- “[*This author*] writes about...”
- “[*This movie*] is set in...”

Here’s an example of an introductory paragraph containing unnecessary summary.

Sentences that summarize are in italics:

- *The Great Gatsby is the story of a mysterious millionaire, Jay Gatsby, who lives alone on an island in New York. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the book, but the narrator is Nick Carraway. Nick is Gatsby’s neighbor, and he chronicles the story of Gatsby and his circle of friends, beginning with his introduction to the strange man and ending with Gatsby’s tragic death.* In the story, Nick describes his environment through various colors, including green, white, and grey. Whereas white and grey symbolize false purity and decay respectively, the color green offers a symbol of hope.

Here’s how you might make a more effective introduction:

- In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald provides readers with detailed descriptions of the area surrounding East Egg, New York. In fact, Nick Carraway’s narration describes the setting with as much detail as the characters in the book. Nick’s description of his environment presents the book’s themes, symbolizing significant aspects of the post-World War I era. Whereas white and grey symbolize the false purity and decay of the 1920s, the color green offers a symbol of hope.

The revised version mentions the book's title, author, setting, and narrator, but then the paragraph quickly moves to the writer's own main topic: the setting and its relationship to the main themes of the book. The paragraph closes with the writer's specific thesis about the symbolism of white, grey, and green.

How Do I Write More Analytically?

Analysis requires breaking something (a story, poem, play, theory, or argument) into parts so you can understand how those parts work together to create the whole. Ideally, you should analyze a work as you read it. It may help you to jot down some notes while you read. Write about major themes or any ideas you notice (anything that intrigues, puzzles, excites, or irritates you). **Analytic writing goes beyond the obvious to discuss questions of how and why**; try asking yourself those questions as you read.

The St. Martin's Handbook (the bulleted material below is quoted from p. 38 of the fifth edition) encourages readers to take the following steps in order to analyze a text:

- **Identify evidence that supports or illustrates the main point or theme** as well as anything that seems to contradict it.
- **Consider the relationship between the words and the visuals in the work.** Are they well integrated, or are they sometimes at odds with one another? What functions do the visuals serve? To capture attention? To provide more detailed information or illustration? To appeal to readers' emotions?
- **Decide whether the sources used are trustworthy.**

- **Identify the work’s underlying assumptions about the subject**, as well as any biases it reveals.

Once you’ve written a draft, ask yourself “What’s the main point of my paper?” or “What am I arguing in this paper?” If you can’t answer these questions, then you haven’t gone beyond summarizing. Consider how much of your writing comes from your own ideas or arguments. If you’re reporting someone else’s ideas, you probably aren’t offering your own analysis.

What Strategies Can Help Me Avoid Excessive Summary?

- **Read the assignment prompt as soon as you get it.** Reread it before you start writing. It may help to refer back to your assignment as you write. (For more help, check out our handout on reading assignments).
- **Formulate an argument (including a good thesis)** and be sure that your final draft is structured around it. Try to only use aspects of the plot, story, history, background, etc. as evidence for your argument; this will help you think more analytically (See our handout on constructing thesis statements).
- **Read critically.** Imagine having a dialogue with the work you’re discussing. What parts do you agree or disagree with? What questions do you have about the work? Does it remind you of other works you’ve seen?
- **Use clear topic sentences that make arguments in support of your thesis statement.** (Read our handout on paragraph development for more information).
- **Use two different highlighters to mark your paper.** With one color, highlight areas of summary or description. With the other, highlight areas of analysis. For most college papers, it’s a good idea to have lots of analysis and very little summary/description.

- **Ask yourself: What part of the essay would be obvious to a reader/viewer?** What parts (words, sentences, paragraphs) of the essay could be deleted without loss? Your paper should focus on points that are essential because you want your paper to be interesting to people who have already read or seen the work you are writing about.

I'm Writing a Review. Don't I Have to Summarize?

If you're writing a critique of a piece of literature, a film, or a dramatic performance, you don't necessarily need to give away much of the plot. The point is to let readers decide whether they want to enjoy it for themselves. If you do summarize, keep it concise. Instead of telling your readers that the play, book, or film was "boring," or "really good," tell them specifically what parts of the work you're talking about. It's also important that you go beyond adjectives and explain *how* the work achieved its effect (how was it interesting?) and why you think the author/director wanted the audience to react a certain way.

If you're writing a review of an academic book or article, it may be important for you to summarize the main ideas and give an overview of the organization so your readers can decide whether it is relevant to their specific research interests.

If you are unsure how much (if any) summary a particular assignment requires, ask your professor or TA for guidance.

This information originally appeared in a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.