

Writing 122: Argument & Style

Writing Effective Summaries



Those of you who read over your classmates' week-one summaries and posted the answers to the reflective questions that I asked you to answer have already touched upon some of the following points. There is much more to writing an effective summary, and I was hoping that, as a class, we would have come up with more of the following characteristics on our own.

Perhaps if you take a few moments to read over the following lists and then read the sample summaries, you will get a better idea of what to strive for and what to avoid when you summarize. **After you read the lists below** (provided by past students from my hybrid Writing 122 course), **please click on the link at the bottom of the page, read the two brief summaries that you find there, and note what works and what doesn't.**

This exercise is purely for your benefit. I will not ask you to write any response or turn anything in. I will, however, expect that your summaries for our class and in your essays exhibit most of the qualities described below.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE SUMMARIES:

- 1) Introduce the author and article.
- 2) Be objective; summarize in a neutral tone.
- 3) Be sure to be general enough to cover the main points of the entire article or text, representing the author's ideas fairly.
- 4) Conveys the main idea (thesis) of the original and sums up some of the supporting details, providing an occasional specific example where relevant.
- 5) Use transitions when you summarize that help the reader move from one idea to the next, providing some structure and style to the summary.
- 6) Quote sparingly (if at all).
- 7) Use third person (e.g. *Sykes, he, privacy advocates, critics of the privacy debate, etc.*).
- 8) Vary your [verb choice](#).

WHAT TO AVOID WHEN SUMMARIZING:

- 1) Don't jump into summarizing the ideas or topics of an article without providing brief background and saying who wrote it.
- 2) Don't include opinion or commentary in a summary. The purpose of summary is to say what it says, nothing more.
- 3) Don't spend the majority of the summary focusing on a single detail or a small group of details from an article or text. A summary's job is to represent an entire text (or portion of a text if your assignment calls for it).
- 4) Don't make the mistake of being too brief or too wordy. Readers require more than just the main point; they want to know *why* the author argues as he or she does and *how* the author proves his or her point. A few well-chosen details will suffice. Summary is brief, just not *too* brief.
- 5) Don't simply list the main points of an article or text (e.g. "Sykes says, And then he says, And then he says,"). This is a good strategy for putting your audience to sleep.
- 6) Don't include many quotes or long quotes in a summary. The nature of a summary is to put another's ideas in one's own words.
- 7) Don't use the first (*I, We, Me, Us, My, Our*) and third person (*You, Your*). This is essentially true for most academic writing.
- 8) Don't use the same verb over and over again (e.g. "Sykes

says Sykes says Sykes says.")

9) Use present tense ("Sykes argues that loss of privacy is a serious problem.")

9) Don't use past tense (e.g. "Sykes argued that loss of privacy is/was a serious problem"). No matter how old a text is, we always discuss it in the present tense. Even if an author has been dead for centuries, his or her text still exists in the present; thus, we use the present tense.

Now that you've read over the lists of strategies for effective summaries and what to avoid when summarizing, **take a few minutes to read the summaries you will find [by clicking on this link](#)**. You will notice that at the bottom of the second page, there are instructions for an in-class activity. For this class, I am asking you only to read the summaries and make note of what makes one summary more effective than the other. **As I mentioned above, you will not be graded on nor asked to turn in this exercise.**



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