

# Writing Summaries

A note: CUSSW instructors vary greatly in what they ask of students when writing summaries; therefore, what follows should be read as a guide, not as a directive.

The goal of writing a summary of an article, a chapter, or a book is to offer as accurately as possible the full sense of the original, but in a more condensed form. A summary restates the author's main point, purpose, intent, and supporting details in your own words.

The process of summarizing can help you to better grasp the original, and your summary will show the reader that you understand it as well. In addition, the knowledge gained will enhance your ability to analyze and critique the original.

- **First, identify the type of article you are reading**, as it will determine the approach you will want to take in writing your summary. Most journal articles are structured and written according to one of five types:
  1. **Empirical** studies are reports of original research containing four distinct sections. You will want to locate and write about the **purpose** of the study or the **problem** under investigation; the **methods** used; the **results**; and the **conclusion** the author makes from the results, including implications for the field of practice.
  2. **Review** articles evaluate studies already published. You will need to **describe the question or problem** being addressed; **summarize the literature review**, which is a major part of a review article; and **describe the author's suggestions** for the next steps in dealing with the problem.
  3. **Theoretical** articles examine research literature to assess and or advance current theory. The summarizing process is similar to that for a review article.
  4. **Methodological** studies focus on approaches and analyses of new or existing methods of conducting research in comparison to alternative methods. Your approach is also similar to 2 and 3 above: describe the approach, its applicability, supporting details, conclusions, and implications for the approach or analysis under study.

5. **Case** studies describe work with an individual or organization to illustrate a problem, indicate a way of solving a problem, or point to areas of needed research. Again, your approach will be similar to 2, 3, and 4 above.

- **Second, for all articles, keep these four sets of questions in mind:**

1. In the introduction: What is the author's **purpose**, or goal, or thesis? Why is she writing this article? What does she want to say?
2. What are the author's **methods** or key points? How does the author go about making her points? What method is she using to conduct her study?
3. What are the **results**, the findings?
4. What are the **conclusions**? What does the author say about her findings? What are the implications of the results? What do the results mean for the field, for further research?

- **Third, approach reading the article with a critical eye for all of the above.**

Good study skills help produce good writing; that is, learning how to identify key points (how to discriminate, how to decide what is important and what is not), and taking note of them, will help you improve your critical thinking skills.

Due to the structure of these articles—and because you have so many of them to read and summarize—try not to read them as you would a traditional narrative, for example, a novel or an essay with an opening position on some issue, followed by supporting details, and conclusion (though this is not true for all social work journals).

1. Check the length of the article; then read the headings, subheadings, graphs, tables, pictures. Next, read the introduction and the conclusion, or the first and last paragraphs. Next, read the first and last paragraphs of each section—between the headings. This approach will provide you with a preview of the work, helping you to effectively engage with it.

2. Read each section, jotting down notes on or highlighting the important points. Write the central idea and the author's reasons (purpose and intent) for holding this viewpoint. Note the supporting elements the author uses to explain or back up her main information or claim.
3. If you choose to write an outline, include in it the main idea and any supporting details. Arrange your information in a logical order, for example, most to least important, or chronological. Your order need not be the same as that in the original, but keep related supporting points together. The way you organize the outline may serve as a model for how you divide and write the essay.
4. Write the summary, making sure to state the author's name in the first sentence. Present the main idea, followed by the supporting points. The remainder of your summary should focus on how the author supports, defines, and or illustrates that main idea. Remember, unless otherwise stated by your instructor, a summary should contain only the author's views, so try to be as objective as possible. A note: prudent use of the author's terms and data does not constitute plagiarism, but the use of phrases (of three or more words) very well may.
5. As you revise and edit your summary, compare it to the original and ask yourself questions such as: Have I rephrased the author's words without changing their meaning? Have I restated the main idea and the supporting points accurately and in my own words?
6. If the assignment calls for you to write a **critical summary** or to include a **critique**, you may want to ask yourself questions such as: Does the author succeed? How and why or why not? What are the strengths, weaknesses? Why? What did the author do well? Not well? Why? In addition, you might want to include a statement on the article's conclusions—their applicability to social work policy, practice, and or research.