

Writing Academic Summaries in Graduate School

Let's talk about academic summaries. For most students summarizing is a familiar skill, but as we transition into graduate school summarizing becomes a much more involved process. This handout will provide you with an understanding of the expectations of writing graduate level academic summaries. Developing the ability to write concise summaries about complex material will not only help you as you work through your graduate program, it will help you as you transition into the workforce. Summarizing is necessary in academic activities like writing literature reviews, and it is a necessary skill in the workplace for activities like developing presentations or progress reports. Even this handout is utilizing my ability to effectively summarize (so meta).

Now that we understand the usefulness of academic summaries, let's turn to authors John Swales and Christine Feak. Swales and Feak (2012, p. 189) break down the elements of an effective summary in their book *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. The authors state:

A good summary has three principal requirements:

1. It should be focused on aspects of the source text or texts that are relevant to your purpose.
2. It should represent the source material in an accurate fashion.
3. It should condense the source material and be presented in your own words.
Summaries that consist of directly copied portions of the original rarely succeed. Such a summary may suggest that you can find potentially important information but will likely fail to reveal the extent to which you have understood it. In addition, you may be plagiarizing.

Let's focus in on number three in that list of principals. As you may know by now academic writing is a collaborative process. As scholars we are constantly building off of the work of others, and incorporating previous scholarship into our own work. Summarizing helps us to effectively incorporate previous research into our own work, by allowing us to contextualize that research. Without this contextualization the research we cite may seem out of place within our writing. For example, notice how I have contextualized the list from Swales and Feak here. First, I introduced the list into the text by explaining where the list comes from and its purpose. Next, in this paragraph I have explained how the list serves my purpose for this handout.

Now that we understand what constitutes effective summarizing, let's talk about how to effectively read the source material we intend to summarize. Swales and Feak (2012, p. 189-191) provide us with some key steps to consider when reading source material. The authors state:

Here are some preliminary steps in writing a summary:

1. Skim the text, noticing and noting the subheadings. If there are no subheadings, try to divide the text into sections.
2. If you have been assigned the text, consider why. Determine what type of text you are dealing with—that is, the genre of the source text (e.g., a research paper) or perhaps the organization (problem-solution or general-specific). This can help you identify important information and focus your reading strategies.
3. Read the text, highlighting important information or taking notes.
4. In your own words, list the points of each relevant section. Try to write a one-sentence summary of each.
5. List the key support points for the main topic, and include minor details if necessary.
6. Make sure your notes reflect the strength of the claims or conclusions.
7. Write your reactions or thoughts about the sections you have identified as important. (Keep in mind that information from sources should support, but not become or be offered instead of, your own interpretation and explanation.)
8. Go through the process again. Read the text several times if necessary, making changes to your notes as appropriate.

The key takeaways here are that when reading to summarize you are trying to understand the essence of the article. This means that you should not be overly focused on minute details in the reading, but rather you should understand bigger ideas and ubiquitous themes that the author is trying to convey. Keep in mind that every article or book published has a goal, and a writing process by which the author reaches that goal. Your summary should strive to outline that process and describe the ultimate goal of the work. You should simultaneously use your own knowledge to evaluate the effectiveness of the book or article and the impact it may have on the field of research it is addressing.

In summary of this summary on how to summarize, here are some things to keep in mind as you venture off into the world of academic writing. Graduate level academic summaries are not just a simple restatement of an article or book, but rather they are critical reflections on the important elements of an author's work. We use summaries in graduate school to demonstrate our profound understanding of complex material. Moreover, we use summaries to then contextualize this material into our own work ensuring that the source material is meaningfully incorporated. Academic writing is a collaborative process and academic summarizing is a tool that can help us to become more effective collaborators.

References:

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Additional Resources:

Here is a link to an example of an effective summary from the Purdue Writing Lab:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/english_as_a_second_language/esl_students/paraphrasing_and_summary/summarizing.html

Here is a step by step video of effective summarizing from Professor Rachelle Tannenbaum:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZviZP2qJ2M>