

# Summary Writing

## What Is It? • Why Is It Important?

### What Is It?

- When doing summary writing, the student is in possession of the text or passage of information he/she is to write from.
- The goal of summary writing is to convey the main idea and supporting points of the text but in a more condensed form.
- *As a minimum*, elementary students should know how to write summaries of the common types (genres) of text: biographies, informational articles, and fictional narratives (stories).

### Why Is It Important?

- You are using summarizing skills when you answer questions such as, “What did you do today?” “What was the movie about”, or “How was your game?” These questions require that you select the important details and summarize them to your listener.
- You need to be able to summarize before you can be successful at most other kinds of writing that you will be required to do in college. It is probably the most important writing skill a college student can have. It is also an important skill during note-taking.
- Businesses and politicians frequently hire people to read newspapers and magazines and summarize important stories and articles so they can read the information much more quickly, yet still obtain all of the relevant information they need to know.

### A good summary should . . .

- **Condense (be shorter than) the original text.** How short is short enough? It should be long enough to include the most important information. A rough rule of thumb for passages of 1-3 pages is that a summary should be about 1/3 to 1/4 the length of the original text. For some texts, the appropriate length of the summary depends on why it is being written and what it will be used for, as well as on the length of the original text.
- **Include only the most important information.** But what information is the most important? In any passage, some information is going to be more important than other information. When trying to determine which information to include, the summary writer might ask “Is this piece of information necessary for the summary reader to know in order to understand what the original passage was about?”

- **Reflect only what is written in the text.** A summary comes directly from the text or story passage. It reflects only the point of view and information from the text and does not go beyond or add to the text. For example, what you write in your summary should not include other information you know about the topic nor should it include your opinions about the information in the passage.
- **Be written in your own words.** This means that the summary is not copied directly from the text. The same ideas are conveyed, but you have translated these into your own way of saying them. This often results in the text being condensed, as well. Individual key words *should* be copied from the text, but usually *not* phrases (groups of words), and definitely *not* sentences.
- **Be well written.** This means, very simply, that the summary follows the rules of good writing (e.g. spelling, word usage, punctuation, sentence construction, and organization).

## Summary Writing Conventions

- Avoid questions. Most of the time using questions in a summary will be less direct and less efficient than some other way of presenting the information. Questions tend to make an idea longer, rather than shorter, and they often mean the summary reader has to figure out what was in the original text. There will be exceptions, but you have to ask yourself how well questions communicate the information from the passage.
- Avoid the first person (e.g. the word “I”) in your summary. Narratives (stories) are best summarized when the summary is written in the third person (he, she, it, they). The experiences of the characters in the story are not your experiences and should not be presented as though they were.
- Avoid dialogue. Dialogue is usually not an effective way to summarize a narrative. There may be times when you cannot avoid using dialogue or when it is the best way to convey the contents of the passage. But in general, it should be avoided.
- Begin with information from the passage, not with an introductory statement such as “This passage is about”, or “What I read in the passage was.” Include the genre of the passage, the title of the passage, and the author (if it is given) in the topic sentence or introductory paragraph of your summary.