

SUMMARIZING A SCHOLARLY JOURNAL ARTICLE

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Students are often required to summarize scholarly journal articles or to base reviews or critiques or research papers on scholarly sources, all of which require acts of summary. Summary is one of the most prominent features of academic writing because it gives writers access to the ideas of others. You will find that most of the academic writing you do will respond to or be based on the ideas – the writing – of others.

The guide that follows will introduce you to scholarly summary and describe it as a process.

Scholarly Journal Articles, Research Situations, and Knowledge

Scholarly journals publish research by professional researchers who often study and teach in universities or other research institutions. Before scholarly articles are published, they are reviewed by researchers who share the research concerns of your article's author. This means that before an article can be published in a scholarly journal it has to be considered worthy of publication because it meets the scholarly goal of generating new knowledge about a specific topic. To be published, the article must have taken into account most of what is already known about a topic. So current research articles are useful because they incorporate (sometimes explicitly) what is understood about a research question.

Summary Reports; Summary Does not Evaluate

The goal of your summary, then, is to *report in a brief and yet accurate manner the main gists* (“gist” refers to the main or essential parts of the article, its main line or lines of reasoning) of the article. The goal of summary **is not to offer an evaluation or opinion** of the original article, but, rather, to report the writer's main ideas and findings. This means that you will need to *indicate to your reader the writer's main point or points or purpose for writing*. You will also need to *point out how the writer develops or supports his or her main point*.

Since one of the goals of summary is to present a far more concise version than the original, it is **not** usual to include direct quotes from the original or even to include very many specific, concrete details from the original, though you may need to include one or two brief examples that illustrate the writer's main point or points. Think of a summary as the child of the original document: fully formed and able to make sense and stand on its own, a new text, not exactly the same as its original, but bearing the features of its parental origins, so much so that anyone who sees the summary might be heard to remark, “Oh, you have your parents' main features; you even sound like you parents, but you are much shorter!”

How to Produce a Small Child from an Unwieldy Parent, or the Process of Summarizing a Scholarly Journal Article

1. **To begin, flip through** the entire article, noting any headings the author may have used to indicate main sections or topic shifts in the article. These headings reflect the writer's organization or structure in the article. Pay special attention to the title of the article; it should indicate the writer's

topic and approach to that topic. If you can get a sense of how the writer has structured the information in her article, you are well on your way to summarizing it.

2. **Read the abstract** at the beginning of the article if there is one. The abstract is an even more concise summary of the article than the summary you will do.
3. **Read the article** through once to capture the gists of the article, its main ideas. You are reading here to get a sense of the writer's topic and the important relationships or connections between the parts of the article. Understanding these connections is necessary to write a coherent summary.
4. **Read the article again** in a far more active way: this involves note taking (by making notes in the margins of the paper to capture essential ideas) and sorting more abstract, general information or ideas from detailed, concrete information (by highlighting these different kinds of information with differently-coloured highlighter pens).

You have five goals in this note-taking process:

- to make note of the writer's main ideas which will usually be general and abstract
- to make note of the more detailed description of examples or cases that help the writer to interpret or analyze the more general, abstract ideas she is attempting to work with
- to notice the distinction between abstract and detailed information (by highlighting each in different colours!)
- to capture the connections between important ideas
- to make note of important ideas in shorthand form: don't copy the writer's words into the margin, but retain key words, translating the writer's complex ideas into nuggets of information

As you take notes, keep in mind that you are **actively sorting** through the text for important ideas that will need to appear in the summary to accurately represent the writer's ideas, **leaving behind** information that is too detailed, that if retained would extend the summary, making it far too long.

Summary cannot capture all of the abstract ideas within an article and the detailed supporting material which the writer includes to help the reader to interpret those abstract concepts or ideas. Neither can summary report all of the technical terminology of the original, though it should retain some of the key terminology. After all, your summary has to resemble its source.

This suggests that summary involves acts of **sorting** (general, abstract concepts from detailed examples or cases), acts of **connecting** important ideas, and acts of **translation** (rephrasing complex ideas into more concise, portable forms), which can make a long, complicated document accessible for use.

Remember that the goal of summary is to produce a handsome, fully formed, coherent text that bears an accurate relationship to its original, presenting it in a much briefer form.

5. **Look for connections** between the nuggets of information that emerged from the note-taking process and **write a first draft** of your summary.

As you write the first draft of your summary, you will likely notice that the writer has located important ideas and the connections between them at various places in the article. Because of this, you may not be able to summarize the article in the same linear pattern of the original. You may notice for example, that the most important point the writer makes is located in her last paragraph.

This would then need to come forward in your summary; your reader would look for it near the beginning. You may also notice that between main ideas, and between material that connects one main idea to another, may be located several paragraphs of detailed description. Your summary does not need to capture all of the detailed description, but it should capture the connection between ideas, suggesting that you shouldn't expect to retain a key idea in every paragraph of the original article. Remember, too, that retaining some detailed examples or descriptions from the original may help your summary reader make a strong connection to the original article. Be cautious, though, in the amount of detail you bring into your summary. Too much will bog down your summary and obscure the writer's main ideas that you are attempting to report.

6. **Read the draft of your summary to someone** who has not read the original article. Ask him or her to let you know if it makes sense. Above all, your summary needs to be a coherent document that **both makes sense on its own and accurately reflects its original source**.
7. **Express your summary in a scholarly style**. This involves introducing your source in a scholarly way, describing what kind of writing your source is and its main finding, and keeping in touch with your source throughout your summary.

Here is an example of a summary that displays a scholarly style:

Susan McDonald's [scholarly writers name their sources] *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (1994) [scholarly writers name the texts they summarize and the dates those texts were published] is a cross-disciplinary study [scholarly writers name the kind of writing they are summarizing] which articulates epistemological differences in disciplinary practice as they manifest through recurrent rhetorical practices [scholarly writers describe their source's main finding or conclusion]. To help clarify differences in knowledge-making practices, she identifies [scholarly writers keep in touch with their source, "she," i.e., MacDonald, and use reporting language, e.g., "identifies"] four patterns of variation in epistemological practice within disciplines that range from scientific to humanistic.



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- promotes and researches writing as a foundational activity connected to critical thinking and learning in a post-secondary setting,
- provides a confidential service offering writing instruction to students who wish to become effective writers in their fields of study, and
- engages in dialogue with UFV's community of learners about the teaching of writing in discipline areas.

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