

# SUMMARIES

A summary is (1) a concise rewriting of another person's text in which the central point and supporting points of the original text are included but all the examples and details are omitted, or more clearly (2) "a rewritten, shortened version of a piece of writing in which you use your own wording to express the main ideas" (Brandon 19).

## SUMMARIES IN ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENTS

In academic writing, students may be required to write summaries. These kinds of assignments may fall into the following categories:

- A professor may assign a text, such as an article in a magazine or online publication, for a student to summarize in a paragraph or page-length essay.
- A professor may assign an analysis of a text (perhaps a literary text, such as a short story). In this type of assignment, a brief summary of the text usually precedes the analysis.

Whatever the assignment, students must adjust their summaries to meet the expectations of the instructor and the requirements of the assignment.

## GENERAL RULES FOR WRITING A SUMMARY

1. At the beginning of the summary (usually in the first sentence), mention the author and title of the text being summarized.
2. Reduce your summary to about 10-20% of the length of the original text. However, a summary in an analysis of a literary text may be only a few sentences long. In other words, the length of a summary depends upon the assignment and the length of the original text.
3. Use a neutral and objective tone. Do not use first person or add comments or opinions of your own.
4. Use your own words to summarize the focus and main points of the original text. However, if you borrow phrases or sentences from the text, place quotation marks around those phrases and cite the source, using the style guide assigned by the instructor (generally, MLA or APA).

## STEPS FOR WRITING A SUMMARY

1. Read the text you want to summarize.
2. Reread the text, highlighting what you think are the main points of the text.
3. Rewrite those points in your own words.
4. Be sure to follow the order of the original text in your summary.
5. Revise the summary, adding important points, deleting examples and details.
6. Be accurate and avoid plagiarism by placing quotation marks around any words or phrases lifted from the original text.
7. Make sure that the summary has an introductory statement which includes the author's name and title of the text, supporting points, and a concluding sentence.

*Definition from:* Brandon, Lee and Brandon Kelly. Sentences, Paragraphs, and Beyond: A Worktext with Readings. 4th ed. Houghton Mifflin Co: Boston, 2005.

# EXAMPLES OF SUMMARIES

## One-Paragraph Summary of a Five to Six Page Article

Summary of “But What Do You Mean?” by Deborah Tannen

**Opening Sentence:**

mentions the title of article and author’s name; states the main point of the article

**Body of Summary:**

follows the order of the article being summarized; includes the main points of the article; uses neutral language; excludes the examples and stories the author included in the original essay; identifies with quotation marks words and phrases original to Tannen’s essay.

**Final sentence:**

wraps up the summary

In her essay, “But What Do You Mean?,” Deborah Tannen discusses how men and women differ in their use of conversational “rituals.” Men tend to use language to maintain superiority in conversation; women seem to defer to the feelings of others. Tannen identifies seven ways in which men and women miscommunicate. First, women use apologies to reassure other people. Men can misinterpret such apologies as acceptance of blame rather than as the ritual reassurance it is meant to be. Second, men criticize more directly than women; women “soften” their criticism in order to spare the feelings of the person they are criticizing. Third, women often say “thank you” ritualistically, just to put the other person on equal footing with themselves. Fourth, men enjoy “verbally sparring” more than women; because of this difference, women can feel that they are being attacked in a conversation. Fifth, women and men use praise differently. Women tend to expect praise when they have done a good job; men tend to think that not criticizing (in other words, saying nothing) is praise enough. Sixth, women discuss their problems in order to share their experiences; they complain not to have their problems solved but to “commiserate.” When men hear complaints, however, they don’t view the complaints as conversation but as problems to be solved. Finally, men and women tend to differ in their senses of humor. Men prefer teasing and “playful insults” while women prefer humor that is more “self-deprecating.” Because of these differences, women can misinterpret men’s humor as “hostile.” Tannen concludes by stating that differences are not wrong—just different—and that recognizing these differences may help men and women communicate more clearly.

## Brief Summary Appearing in the Opening Paragraph of an Analysis

Rethinking the Big Box Stores

**Beginning:**

The writer begins by briefly summarizing the original text, using neutral language.

**Transition:**

However, since this is an analysis, the writer then introduces her opinion of the work and the thesis of her analysis.

In her essay “Big Box Stores are Bad for Main Street,” Betsy Taylor focuses not on the economic effects of large chain stores but on the effects these stores have on the “soul” of America. She argues that stores like Home Depot, Target, and Wal-Mart are bad for America because they draw people out of downtown shopping districts and cause them to focus exclusively on consumption. In contrast, she believes that small businesses are good for America because they provide personal attention, foster community interaction, and make each city unique. But Taylor’s argument is ultimately unconvincing because it is based on nostalgia—on idealized images of a quaint Main Street—rather than on the roles that businesses play in consumers’ lives and communities. By ignoring the more complex, economically driven relationships between large chain stores and their communities, Taylor incorrectly assumes that simply getting rid of big-box stores would have a positive effect on America’s communities.

[The remainder of the essay discusses the writer’s analysis of Taylor’s misplaced nostalgia for small businesses and misunderstanding of the relationships between chain stores and their communities.]

Hacker, Diana. A Writer’s Reference. 6th ed. Bedford/St. Martin’s: Boston, 2007. 64.