

## **PREPARING A SUMMARY**

At some point in a course, your instructor may ask you to write a summary of a book, article, TV show, or the like. In a *summary* (also referred to as a *précis* or *abstract*), you reduce material in an original work to its main points and key supporting details. Unlike an outline, however, a summary does not use symbols such as 1, A, 1, 2, etc., to indicate the relations among parts of the original material.

A summary may be a word, a phrase, several sentences, or one or more paragraphs in length. The length of the summary you prepare will depend on your instructor's expectations and the length of the original work. Most often, you will be asked to write a summary of one or more paragraphs.

Writing a summary brings together a number of important reading, study, and writing skills. To condense the original matter, you must preview, read, evaluate, organize, and perhaps outline the assigned material. Summarizing, then, can be a real aid to understanding: you must "get inside" the material and realize fully what is being said before you can reduce its meaning to a few words.

### **HOW TO SUMMARIZE AN ARTICLE**

To write a summary of an article, follow the steps described below. If the assigned material is a TV show or film, adapt the suggestions accordingly.

1. Take a few minutes to preview the work. You can preview an article in a magazine by taking a quick look at the following:
  - A. Title. The title often summarizes what the article is about. Think about the title for a minute and how it may condense the meaning of an article.
  - B. Subtitle. A subtitle, if given, is a short summary appearing under or next to the title. For example, in a Newsweek article entitled "Growing Old, Feeling Young," the following caption appeared: "Not only are Americans living longer, they are staying active longer—and their worst enemy is not nature, but the myths and prejudices about growing old." In short, the subtitle, the caption, or any other words in large print under or next to the title often provide a quick insight into the meaning of an article.
  - C. First and last several paragraphs. In the first several paragraphs, the author may introduce you to the subject and state the purpose of the article. In the last several paragraphs, the writer may present conclusions or a summary. These previews or summaries can give you a quick overview of what the entire article is about.
  - D. Other items. Note any heads or subheads that appear in the article. They often provide clues to the article's main points and give an immediate sense of what each section is about. Look carefully at any pictures, charts, or diagrams that accompany the article. Page space in a magazine or journal is limited, and such visual aids are generally used

only when they help illustrate important points in the article. Note any words or phrases set off in italic type or boldface point; such words have probably been emphasized because they deal with important points in the article.

2. Read the article for all you can understand the first time through. Do not slow down or turn back. Check or otherwise mark main points and key supporting details. Pay special attention to all the items noted in the preview. Also, look for definitions, examples, and enumerations (lists of items), as these often indicate key ideas. You can also identify important points by turning any heads into questions and reading to find the answers to the questions.
3. Go back and reread more carefully the areas you have identified as most important. Also, focus on other key points you may have missed in your first reading.
4. Take notes on the material. Concentrate on getting down the main ideas and the key supporting points.
5. Prepare the first draft of your summary, keeping these points in mind:
  - A. Identify at the start of the summary the title and author of the work. Also, include in parentheses the date of publication. For example, "In an article titled 'Those Misleading Bank Ads' (Newsweek, January 31, 1983), Jane Bryant Quinn states . . ."
  - B. Do not write an overly detailed summary. Remember that the purpose of a summary is to reduce the original work to its main points and essential supporting details.
  - C. Express the main points and keep supporting details in your own words. Do not imitate or stay too close to the style of the original work.
  - D. Quote from the material only to illustrate key points. Also, limit your quotations. A one-paragraph summary should not contain more than one or two quoted sentences.
  - E. Preserve the balance and proportion of the original work. If the original devoted 70 percent of its space to one idea and only 30 percent to another, your summary should reflect that emphasis.
  - F. Revise the first draft, paying attention to the principles of effective writing (unity, support, coherence, and clear, error-free sentences) explained in Part One.
  - G. Write the final draft of the paper.

## **A MODEL SUMMARY**

Here is a model summary of a magazine article.

In "Kids with Nuclear Jitters" (Newsweek, October 11, 1982). Eloise Salholz describes the fears that American children and adolescents have about

nuclear war. Some children have become insomniacs or are plagued by nightmares. Others feel that, if there won't be a future, there's no sense in pursuing goals or raising a family. Sanholz tells of one little girl who worries about whether she would have time to commit suicide before a nuclear attack, a ten-year-old boy is terrified, he says because "when adults worry about nuclear war, it makes you feel scared." Psychologists are now advising parents to answer children's questions about nuclear war as honestly as they can and to reassure children that it is possible to work for peace. Educators like Roberta Snow of the Boston school system are teaching high school students about the physics of the bomb, disarmament, civil defense, and negotiation. Books about nuclear war, geared toward the young, are also beginning to appear. One, from Japan, tells the story of a little girl who survives the Hiroshima explosion. Because they sense the terror of our times, children seem to need reassurance, straight information, and even counseling to deal with their nuclear nightmares.

## HOW TO SUMMARIZE A BOOK

To write a summary of a book, first of all preview the book by taking a quick look at the following:

- 1. Title.** The title is often the shortest possible summary of what a book is about. Think about the title for a minute and how it may summarize the whole meaning of the work.
- 2. Table of contents.** The contents will tell you the number of chapters in the book and the subject of each chapter. Use the contents to get a general sense of how the book is organized. You should also note the number of pages in each chapter. If thirty pages are devoted to one episode or idea and an average of fifteen pages to other episodes or ideas in the book, you should probably give more space to the contents of the longer chapter in your summary.
- 3. Preface.** Here you will probably find out why the author wrote the book. Also, the preface may summarize the main ideas developed in the book and may describe briefly how the book is organized.
- 4. First and last chapters.** In these chapters, the author may preview or review important ideas and themes developed in the book.
- 5. Other items.** Note the way the author has used headings and subheadings to organize information in the book. Check the opening and closing paragraphs of each chapter to see if they contain introductions or summaries. Look quickly at charts, diagrams, and pictures in the books, since they are probably there to illustrate key points. Note any special features (index, glossary, appendixes) that may appear at the end of the book.