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The Art of Summary

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how to concisely summarize the key points of a text. Through summary, we can condense others' arguments to give space to support our argument.

To Sum Up...

Every time we engage in written or oral storytelling, we include the necessary details and ignore the unnecessary ones. We might even retell the same story to two audiences and select different details for each one. We repackage the events of the past and the texts written before us to prove their significance for our purposes. A summary is essential for many types of writing, as it helps the audience understand key points without reading the text themselves. When an audience does not have the time to read a text, so they rely on you to communicate the main ideas. Whether including a brief synopsis of an important article as background to your major claim or composing a plot recap to urge your readers to see the latest blockbuster film, it is crucial to learn the art of summary.

Relevant Details

The first step to creating an effective summary is asking the right questions. You should ask yourself who your audience is, how long your summary should be, what key points are necessary for your audience, and – most importantly – how you will frame those points to further your argument. Writing a strong summary can help your readers understand the background of your argument and, therefore, help them understand and possibly even agree with your points. Writers need summaries to help support their thesis, so using them effectively is important.

Typically, writers do not include most of the text they are summarizing, so the audience must be given the vital pieces of information. To begin, compartmentalize the text into sections. If the article is a scientific paper, it will already be separated into sections, including introduction, methodology, results, and discussion. Once you have separated the text, investigate each section and identify the key points. Key points include the information your reader needs in order to understand the thesis and conclusion of the text, which means leaving out any background information or small unnecessary details.

Identifying which are key points and which are not can be the hardest part of the summary. Take detailed notes at first, including everything that might be important. Draft your summary, and for each sentence you write, ask yourself if the summary would make sense without that sentence. If it is not necessary, delete it. Pay close attention to the author's thesis, key events or claims in the text, and topic sentences that highlight the main idea of each paragraph or section. Then, depending on how long the summary needs to be, try structuring your summary just as you might a paragraph in an argumentative essay. Be concise, compacting the necessary information into clear, simple sentences to avoid being long-winded or distracting the reader.

Example

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A summary should explain essential details, which will usually include the thesis, key information, and key events. If a writer were to summarize the story of “The Tortoise and the Hare”, their paragraph might look like this:

In the story of “The Tortoise and the Hare,” the tortoise proves that slow and steady wins the race. At the beginning, the Hare boasts about his speed and agility, so the Tortoise decides to challenge the Hare to prove a point. Due to the “certainty” of his victory, the Hare decides to take a nap during the race, distracting himself from his goal. In doing this, he forfeits the victory to the Tortoise when the slower animal eventually passes him by, thereby learning that speed doesn’t always lead to success.

Since most of us are aware of the story of “The Tortoise and the Hare,” you may have noticed that there were several small details left out of the summary. For example, inserting that the Hare takes a nap *under the tree* is unnecessary as part of the summary. The audience can still understand the story’s gist without that specific detail. This is why making the decision of what is important and what isn’t is vital. If your summary is overloaded with unnecessary details or you have omitted any of the key events, your audience won’t understand the main idea, and it will not successfully support your argument.

Tips

1. Pay attention to headings/subheadings, as those will give you clues as to the article's main points.
2. To avoid plagiarism, before writing the summary, try setting the article aside after reading it and writing about it from memory. This could also help you identify key points.
3. Maintain an ethical and unbiased perspective when summarizing. Sometimes, we are asked to summarize texts or authors with whom we disagree; it is even more important in those moments to present the author clearly and charitably on his or her own terms.
4. Use transitions to keep your writing flowing clearly while summarizing.

Works Consulted

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