Writing a Summary (Abstract)

Summarizing is an important skill for effective note-taking during research. However, this skill is also crucial for doing effective research writing in many disciplines, especially the social and natural sciences, where submitting an abstract may be a required part of the assignment. In fact, the abstract may be the most-read part of the paper. For help with writing summaries and abstracts, review the following pages, which offer explanations, models, and writing instructions.

What Are Summaries and Abstracts?

A summary is a written statement that extracts from a larger document all the key points and significant information needed by particular readers. Essentially, the word abstract is a synonym for summary in that an abstract also describes the content of a larger document or pulls out and gathers the original’s key points. However, abstract is a more technical term that often refers to summaries published as part of research in academic disciplines. Such abstracts are published along with or even separate from the longer research study. For example, abstracts appear in database descriptions of articles, at the beginnings of research articles, and in separate published indexes such as Personnel Management Abstracts.

Are There Different Types of Summaries and Abstracts?

In your research writing, you may find yourself writing three types of summaries or abstracts:

A descriptive summary or abstract briefly lists the topics covered in the fuller paper. In fact, it’s more of a table of contents than a summary of points and claims made. Essentially, the descriptive abstract answers the reader’s question concerning the report’s relevance to his or her topic.

**Sample Descriptive Abstract:** Note that the abstract below (1) uses a “telegraphic” style that includes sentence fragments and (2) seeks to offer readers helpful keywords.


- Discusses hydrogen fuel-cell cars.
- Environmental benefits of the use of hydrogen over petroleum;
- Limits of the petroleum-fueled internal-combustion engine (ICE);
- Efficiency of hydrogen fuel cells;
- Implications of hydrogen fuel cells for personal transportation and for the automotive industry business model;
- Operation of a fuel-cell vehicle;
- Effects of fuel cells on vehicle design;
- General Motors-created AUTOnomy concept and Hy-wire prototype;
- Drive-by-wire technology;
- Obstacles for fuel-cell cars.

The informative summary or abstract gets at the key points, claims, and arguments made by the fuller report. This type focuses on conclusions related to the topics covered. As such, this summary tends to be longer than the descriptive summary and focuses on helping readers arrive at conclusions and make decisions.

**Sample Informative Abstract:** See the psychology experiment abstract in the sample APA paper on page 551 in section 54c. Note how that abstract goes beyond listing the topic of the experiment to summarize the purpose, methods, results, and discussion.
This study examined the effects of short-term food deprivation on two cognitive abilities—concentration and perseverance. Undergraduate students ($N = 51$) were tested on both a concentration task and a perseverance task after one of three levels of food deprivation: none, 12 hours, or 24 hours. We predicted that food deprivation would impair both concentration scores and perseverance time. Food deprivation had no significant effect on concentration scores, which is consistent with recent research on the effects of food deprivation (Green, Elliman, & Rogers, 1995, 1997). However, participants in the 12-hour deprivation group spent significantly less time on the perseverance task than those in both the control and 24-hour deprivation groups, suggesting that short-term deprivation may affect some aspects of cognition and not others.

The evaluative summary or abstract typically begins with an informative component but follows with your judgment of the original document’s strengths and weaknesses: the quality of its thinking, the depth of its support, the reliability of its conclusions, and even perhaps the effectiveness of its organization and style.

**Evaluative Summary or Abstract:** The following passage first summarizes an investigative report conducted by a committee and then evaluates the results.

**Summary:** The 5690 Cherryhill Blvd. building has a moderate infestation of German Cockroaches. Only an integrated program of cockroach control can effectively manage this infestation. Specifically, pesticide fumigations address only the symptoms of the problem, not its causes. The committee recommends that Sommerville adopt a comprehensive program that includes (1) education, (2) cooperation, (3) habitat modification, (4) treatment, and (5) monitoring.

**Evaluation:** The committee’s conclusions and recommendations seem well-researched and logical. In particular, the action plan is thorough—it covers all the bases. Although no price tags are placed on the comprehensive program, the plan itself seems a workable solution.

**Where Are Summaries and Abstracts Located?**
In other words, where are they placed in documents or elsewhere to help readers? Consider these locations:

- In research papers or reports, summaries can appear at the beginning, at the end of the document, and even within sections of longer documents.
- Summaries can be separate documents. For example, an article in a scholarly journal might summarize current research on a key topic. Research abstracts might be published in annual indexes or in electronic research databases.

**What Does a Good Summary Do for Readers?**
A good summary meets the information needs of specific readers. More specifically, a good summary helps readers
• save time and trouble.
• get the gist of something without having to read the whole.
• discover the relevance of the original document.
• get an overview of the document before digesting details.
• conduct their own research efficiently and keep up on developments in their fields.
• decide on a course of action.

What Should Be Included in a Summary?
Depending on the summary’s purpose and readers, the content can vary greatly—from a basic review of the topics covered in the original to more in-depth coverage of the document’s main points, claims, and arguments. Generally, however, do the following:
• Include key points, conclusions, recommendations, significant information—the heart of the original’s discussion and argument.
• Exclude specific examples, supporting details, and extensive numerical data—all the material used to back up the main claims made in the document.

How Long Should a Summary Be?
The length should be tied specifically to how you see your readers using your summary. Generally, however, a summary should be about 10 percent as long as the original document.

What Are the Key Stylistic Qualities of a Good Summary?
Above all, a good summary must be clear to readers. For that reason, the summary should
• have a stand-alone, self-explanatory quality.
• use objective wording and plain English—with a strong emphasis on using the keywords that readers are looking for.
• be written in brief sentences that have strong transitional words (to avoid choppiness related to pulling out key points from the original).
• maintain the focus and tone of the original.
• avoid references to the writer and the document such as “The writer says” or “In the next section. . . .”

Guidelines for Writing Summaries
Your goal when writing a summary is to boil down the information in an original document or your full research report to its key ingredients.

Prewrite: Work with the original document by doing the following:
1. Determine whether you need to write a descriptive, informative, or evaluative summary.
2. Skim the document or section to understand its overall point: check headings, topic sentences, graphics, and so on.
3. Read the document carefully to glean important points. Identify key material:
   • Skip background, examples, descriptions, and most supporting details.
   • Look for essential information—conclusions, main points, claims, key facts—signaled by
     **Enumerating words:** first, second, third, in addition, furthermore, finally
     **Contrasting-points words:** although, however, by contrast, not only . . . but also, on the other hand
Significance words: basically, central, crucial, essential, fundamental, indispensable, important, key, leading, major, principal, serious, significant, main point, conclusion, result, problem, solution, cause, effect

Draft: After reviewing your notes and annotations, generate the summary by putting the key points in your own words.

Opening: State the central point of the document or section.

Middle: Stitch together the supporting points in the same order as in the original.

Closing: Conclude by tying the points together.

Revise: Check your summary by reviewing the ideas, organization, and voice:
• Are all the main ideas accurately conveyed?
• Does the organization of the summary reflect the organization of the original?
• Is the voice true to the original, or have you changed it?

Edit and Proofread: Check word choice, sentence smoothness, correctness, and design:
• Are the words plain English (or a technical vocabulary that the reader understands)? If necessary, substitute simpler words or add definitions.
• Do the sentences read smoothly? If necessary, add transitions and reword long or awkward sentences.
• Is your summary free of grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors? Double check after using spell check and grammar check.
• Is your summary in an easy-to-read format? Change format elements (positioning, page layout, typography) as needed.