GUIDELINES FOR SUMMARIZING SOURCES

Summarizing

Another good skill to help you incorporate research into your writing is summarizing. Summarizing is to take larger selections of text and reduce them to their basic essentials: the gist, the key ideas, the main points that are worth noting and remembering. Think of a summary as the "general idea in brief form"; it's the distillation, condensation, or reduction of a larger work into its primary notions and main ideas.

As with directly quoting and paraphrasing, summarizing requires you to cite your sources properly to avoid "accidental" plagiarism. Moreover, a summary should not change the meaning of the original source. A good summary should be a shortened version that conveys the purpose and main points of the original source.

Components of a Good Summary:

- Write in the present tense.
- Make sure to include the author, the year, and title of the work.
  - For example:
    - In Pixar’s 2003 movie, Finding Nemo…
    - In Stephen King’s horror book The Shining (1977),…
    - In Emily Dickinson’s poem “Because I Could Not Stop for Death (1890),”
- Be concise: a summary should not be equal in length to the original text; it should be about 1/10 as long.
- Include 2–3 main points of the text or work.
- Include the conclusion or the final findings of the work.
- Avoid using quotations. A summary is not a paraphrase or a direct quote. If you must use the author's key words or phrases, always enclose them in quotation marks and cite.
- Don't put your own opinions, ideas, or interpretations into the summary. The purpose of writing a summary is to accurately represent what the author wanted to say, not to provide a critique.

When Is a Summary Useful?

You should summarize when...

- you want to give an overview of a source’s main ideas/points;
- you can express a source's ideas or points in fewer words than the original text;
- you need to give a brief synopsis of more than one source; or
- you want an authority on the topic to support your ideas.

Examples of Good and Bad Summaries

Be careful when you summarize that you avoid stating your opinion or putting a particular bias on what you write. This point is important because the goal of a summary is to be as factual as possible. For example, here is an example of an inaccurate, opinion-laden summary about Pixar’s popular movie Finding Nemo:

So there's a film where a man's wife is brutally murdered by a serial killer and his son is left physically disabled. In a twist of events, the son is kidnapped and kept in a tank while his father
chases the kidnapper thousands of miles with the help of a mentally challenged woman. *Finding Nemo* is quite the thriller.

This example is a **bad** summary because it is very vague, and it contains the writer’s opinion as well as twists the events of the story into something it is not. Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* is not a thriller or a horror story like described above—it is an animated children’s movie about fish.

Here is a **better** summary of *Finding Nemo*:

Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* (2003) is a story about Marlin, a clownfish, who is overly cautious with his son, Nemo, who has a damaged fin. When Nemo swims too close to the surface to prove himself, he is caught by a diver, and horrified Marlin must set out to find him. A blue reef fish named Dory, who has a really short memory, joins Marlin and together they encounter sharks, jellyfish, and a host of ocean dangers. Meanwhile, Nemo plots his escape from a dentist’s fish tank where he is being held. In the end, Marlin and his son Nemo are reunited, and they both learn about trust and what it means to be a family. (*Finding Nemo*, 2003)

This paragraph is a **better** summary than the original one because:

- it is accurate and factual;
- it states the main characters and events of the story;
- it gives the reader the crucial details without giving too many details; and
- it tells the moral of the story/the conclusion without twisting the meaning.

This summary is **good** because…

- it states the author/director, the year, and the title of the work;
- it is about 1/10 the length of the original passage;
- it is clear and understandable to the reader;
- it is void of any quotations or paraphrases, and it includes a parenthetical citation in correct APA format.