

SUMMARY ASSIGNMENT

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ENGLISH 125-64

INTRODUCTION

Summary is one of the crucial skills in reading and writing in college and beyond. When you read, you should be thinking about what the author is saying, analyzing their argument and summarizing it in your head. (This *has to happen* to some extent: when you read an article, you certainly don't remember every single word afterwards, so if you're remembering things, you're probably remembering something you've summarized internally.) You will learn to read more efficiently and effectively by summarizing and analyzing when you read—and you will be a better thinker by actively engaging with the author's writing.

Once you enter the intellectual arena yourself with your own writing, you'll certainly have to engage in summarizing, since you'll need to recap the ideas and arguments of the other thinkers you're grappling with. Here, the summary is no longer for you, but instead for your audience, helping your readers know what was in the works you're discussing.¹

YOUR TASK

For this assignment, you'll write a summary of an article. Choose among the following articles. Each article is either available freely online (google it²); a few I've also made pdfs of and put in the "recommended" folder in ctools. I'd *strongly* recommend that you read multiple of these articles before choosing—the ones you don't choose for this project can be part of your extramural reading.

- Leon Wieseltier, "Crimes Against Humanities," on scientism in the *New Republic* (9/3/2013)
- Timothy Gowers, "The Importance of Mathematics," a transcript of a lecture available from his website³
- Isaac Chotiner, "The Curse of Knowledge," a review of Jonah Lehrer's book *Imagine* in *The New Republic* (6/7/2012)
- Michael Spector, "Germs Are Us," on the human microbiome in the *New Yorker* (10/22/2012)
- T.M. Luhrmann, "Living with Voices," on schizophrenia in the *American Scholar* (summer 2012)
- Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," in the *Atlantic* (6/13/2012)
- Evgeny Morozov, "The Naked and the TED," in the *New Republic* (8/2/2012)
- Tim Wu, "The Right to Evade Regulation," in the *New Republic* (6/3/2013)
- David Brooks, "The Organization Kid," in the *Atlantic* (4/1/2001)
- Amanda Ripley, "The Case Against High-School Sports," in the *Atlantic* (9/18/2013)

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¹The type of summary you'll do will vary greatly based on context. Think about the type of summary you'd do if you expect your readers *not* to have read what you're summarizing, versus what type of summary you'd do if you expect that your readers *had* read it. Also think about the difference between the amount of summary you'd do in writing, say, a 2-page review of something, as opposed to writing a longer article or book.

²Here is a good extension of the library project: being able to find articles online. I was able to find each of these on the original publication's website with a quick google query. If you struggle with this, let me know.

³A copy of the figures are at <http://english125.rafekinsey.com/gowers/gowers-figures.pdf> The original article is at <https://www.dpmms.cam.ac.uk/~wtg10/importance.pdf>

- An article of your choice. Find some article that’s making an argument,⁴ that’s interesting, and that’s sophisticated and lengthy enough to lead to this sort of a summary. Before you start, email me to check if it’s okay.

Once you’ve selected the article, you’ll read it carefully—multiple times. We’ve discussed in class the various techniques for reading, including note-taking, underlining, etc. Certainly, you’ll be doing those here. Once you finish, start thinking about how you’d summarize the article in various contexts:

- You think this article is important, and you might want to remember what’s in the article several months from now. (Perhaps you’re doing research for a bigger project, and the article is going to come up.) What sort of a summary would you write down for yourself so you could remember the author’s argument, including all the details, in five months (or five years?). What if you only needed to remember the basic argument, but not the details—if you only were going to write a 2-sentence summary?
- You’re going to discuss this article in a seminar tomorrow, and you’re in charge of leading the conversation. What sort of notes would you have?
- Suppose you’re emailing a friend to recommend the article. You want to give the friend a quick summary of the article. (What if it’s just verbally?)
- You want to tweet a link to the article—and you only have 140 characters. Or suppose you want to post this on your news feed, so now you have 2-4 sentences?
- You’re editing an anthology of good writing, and you want to include a one paragraph introduction. What would you include? (What if you were only writing the headline?)
- You think this article is wrong, and you’re going to write an article criticizing it. In so doing, you need to provide some summary and context.
- You think the article is great, and you have something additional to add. You write an article building on this article.

I’d encourage you to try several of these types of summary as an exercise, before you begin the main assignment.

Your task will be to write a short summary of the article for a generally educated member of the public who hasn’t read the article. You’ll want to set the context, introducing both the general topic and perhaps also the specific context of the article.⁵ Your summary should give a reader a sense of what the article is about—what argument is the author making? How? Why does this matter? How exactly you do this will depend a lot on the type of article you choose. Some of these articles might offer a tight logical argument. Others might argue from examples, or by providing scientific or historical evidence. One thing you might pay attention to is the rhetorical devices the author is using. Are they relying on logos, ethos, pathos? Although your summary isn’t primarily a rhetorical analysis, it’s fine to note rhetorical techniques used by the author *if* they seem unusual or important enough to be mentioned in the summary.⁶

⁴There are many interesting articles that aren’t focused on making an argument—and you certainly could still summarize these—but this assignment focuses on an article making some sort of an argument. (Note that sometimes the argument might be somewhat implicit; for example, an article that presents a theory of the world is implicitly making an argument along the lines of “This theory helps explain something about the world”, or maybe even just “This theory *might* help explain something about the world.”)

⁵How you’ll do this depends on the situation. Note how the author of the article itself has to do this, setting the context. Do you want to follow their approach? Take your own? Can you assume that your audience is the same as the author’s?

⁶If you choose to do this, be aware of the difficulty of phrasing such analyses in a non-awkward way. For example, if you write “Smith uses pathos in her argument” that sounds weird. It’s hard, but it is possible to phrase such rhetorical analyses in a natural way. Practice saying it aloud. Does it sound weird? If so, keep rewriting.

Your summary should be 1-2 *single-spaced* pages, typed. I've chosen relatively substantial articles, so there should be more than enough to warrant that.

ANALYSIS

The next step after summary is *analysis*.⁷ In this paper, we'll focus just on the summary; you *shouldn't* evaluate or criticize the argument. But you should keep this in mind because in future writing you will be doing more than just summary. Indeed, much of collegiate writing involves this sort of analysis; even, for example, a thesis-based literature paper will largely involve close, analytical discussion of a text. And this analysis is often intertwined with the summary; it's not as if there are always separate sections for summary and analysis (although occasionally there are).⁸

For this assignment, I want you to be aware of the types of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis you might include in a more evaluative or critical assignment. What is the author doing well? Are there holes in the author's argument? Could the author have made the argument more effectively in some way? What are the implications of the author's argument? As a separate paragraph or two, after the end of your paper, write an *informal* reflection where you note some of the things you might discuss in a more evaluative paper. *Do not* include such analyses in your main paper, which should be an objective, non-evaluative summary.

HOW TO WRITE YOUR PAPER

Throughout your life, you've seen examples of summary, even if you aren't aware of it. For example, many of the articles you've read in your extramural reading will probably have summarized others' works. In the readings we've done for this class, we've seen various examples of summary, including the summaries at the end of Fromkin's linguistics chapters, the short summaries in Lera Boroditsky's *Scientific American* article, and the summary Halpern does of Nunberg and Pinker. Of course, many of these summaries are shorter than what you're doing here. A really good source of examples of summary to look at are book reviews. Take a look at the review sections of the *New York Times*, *Economist*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, etc., especially for non-fiction books, to get a sense of how many reviews provide considerable amounts of summary.⁹ Of course, many excellent examples of summary will also include analysis and evaluation. When you take a look at these, pay attention to where the author is doing "just" summary, and when the author is doing more evaluative work.

⁷Actually, these are inherently intertwined. When you make choices about summary, you're doing analysis. Really, there are two senses of "analysis" that I'm using here. One is in the etymological sense of "breaking down"—splitting things apart and figuring out what's happening. You're certainly doing that in summarizing. Then there's the sense of analysis as *evaluation*; that's the next step, which you don't have to do in this assignment. (There's also another step, *synthesis*, where you put back together the things you've broken apart.)

⁸It's important to think about cases where you'd want summary *without* much analysis. For example, suppose you were a newspaper reporter, describing a candidate's political positions. Should you offer analysis, or just report what the candidate said? What if the candidate says things that are false? What if the candidate is only misleading? Also, what are the differences between objective platforms like the news section of the *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, and more subjective areas, like those papers' editorial sections? Consider also the writing in more partisan publications like the left-leaning *New Yorker* or right-leaning publications like *Commentary* or the *Weekly Standard*.

If you haven't already, I'd strongly recommend that you take a look at the *Economist*. Unlike most American newspapers, which strive for objectivity, some British newspapers tend to be associated with specific ideological viewpoints. When you read even the news sections of the *Economist*, you'll see the paper's ideology—generally in support of economic liberalism—throughout. What are the pros and cons of the different approaches? Think also about the role of the blogosphere in this.

⁹The *New Yorker*, *New Republic* and *New York Review of Books* have excellent longer-form reviews, but these are often lengthier and more essayistic.

As I said above, to write this paper, you'll want to read the article *multiple times*. I'd recommend that you (a) take notes while you read the article; (b) create an outline of the article; and (c) create an outline of what *you* are going to write. Note that your paper doesn't necessarily have to follow the same order as the article you're summarizing; indeed, it probably won't.

SOURCES AND COLLABORATION

Other than the original article, you shouldn't need to rely on any sources about the article. Indeed, you *shouldn't* look at any other sources about the original article, because your task is to summarize just this individual article. That said, you are welcome to consult the following if you want:

- If there are any terms or concepts that you don't understand, you can look these up, in a dictionary, online, etc.
- You are welcome to consult any writing guides or other books for advice on writing.
- You are encouraged to look at examples of summary written by others, e.g., the book reviews I mentioned above.

Also, if the original article refers to other sources—for example, if the original article is a review of another book or if it cites specific studies—you are welcome to look at those, although you don't have to.

As with other writing, you are encouraged to ask others to look at your writing and offer advice. We will be doing this with the peer review stage, but it's fine if you ask others for advice.

At the end of your final version, you should include a paragraph where you acknowledge any outside sources that you consulted, as well as anyone whom you consulted in writing the paper. (As with the first assignment, briefly explain how and why you used these sources and help.)

REQUIREMENTS

Article Selection. Email me by Sunday, 10/20, at 3pm with the article you have selected. (If you are selecting an article of your choice, please email me by Saturday, 10/19/2013, so I can make sure it's okay.)

Polished Rough Draft. Your polished rough draft is due by Wednesday, 10/23, in class. Please bring *three printed copies* of your draft, one of which you will hand in to me. Also bring in a *printed copy* of your article. Please also *email me* a copy of your draft by class.

Peer Review Comments. Your peer review comments are due emailed to your partner by Friday, 10/25, at 5pm. You should cc me on that email.

Final Draft. The final draft is due by Tuesday, 10/29 at 5pm. You should both (a) email me a copy in pdf form; and (b) submit a hard copy in my office mailbox.

Instructions for Your Final Draft. Your assignment should be typed, in 12-point font and *single-spaced*. Your main summary should be approximately 1-2 pages. After your main summary, you should have:

- 1-2 informal paragraphs discussing what you might write about if you were to take a more analytical and evaluative stance on the article.
- A paragraph acknowledging sources and collaboration.
- A paragraph reflecting on the assignment. What was easy? What was difficult? What do you think you did well? Etc.

Reminder. Make sure to follow directions!