

## Understanding Article Summaries

An article summary is a short, focused paper about one scholarly article. This paper is informed by critical reading of an article. For argumentative articles, the summary identifies, explains, and analyses the thesis and supporting arguments; for empirical articles, the summary identifies, explains, and analyses the research questions, methods, and findings.

Although article summaries are often short and rarely account for a large portion of your grade, they are a strong indicator of your reading and writing skills. Professors ask you to write article summaries to help you to develop essential skills in critical reading, summarizing, and clear, organized writing. Furthermore, an article summary requires you to read a scholarly article quite closely, which provides a useful introduction to the conventions of writing in your discipline (e.g. Political Studies, Biology, or Anthropology).

## Common Problems in Article Summaries

The most common problem that students have when writing an article summary is that they misunderstand the goal of the assignment. In an article summary, your job is to write *about the article*, not about the actual topic of the article. For example, if you are summarizing Smith's article about the causes of the Bubonic plague in Europe, your summary should be about Smith's article: What does she want to find out about the plague? What evidence does she use? What is her argument? You are *not* writing a paper about the actual causes of Bubonic plague in Europe.

Further, as a part of critical reading, you will often consider your own position on a topic or an argument; it is tempting to include an assessment or opinion about the thesis or findings, but this is not the goal of an article summary. Rather, you must identify, explain, and analyse the main point and how it is supported.

## Read Carefully and Closely

Your key to success in writing an article summary is your understanding of the article; therefore, it is essential to read

## Argumentative Articles

As you read an argumentative article, consider the following questions:

1. What is the topic?
2. What is the research question? In other words, what is the author trying to find out about that topic?
3. What is the thesis or position? What are the supporting arguments?
4. How are supporting arguments developed? What kind of evidence is used?
5. What is the significance of the author's thesis? What does it help you to understand about the topic?

## Empirical Articles

As you read an empirical article, consider the following questions:

1. What is the topic?
2. What is the research question?

3. What are the predictions and the rationale for these predictions?
4. What methods were used (participants, sampling, materials, procedure)? What were the variables and controls?
5. What were the main results?
6. Are the findings supported by previous research?
7. What are the limitations of the study?
8. What are the implications of the findings

### Create a Reverse Outline

Creating a reverse outline is one way to ensure that you fully understand the article. Pre-read the article (read the abstract, introduction, and/or conclusion). Summarize the main question(s) and thesis or findings. Skim subheadings and topic sentences to understand the organization; make notes in the margins about each section. Read each paragraph within a section; make short notes about the main idea or purpose of each paragraph. This strategy will help you to see how parts of the article connect to the main idea or the whole of the article.

### Structure of the Summary

A summary is written in paragraph form and generally does not include subheadings. An introduction is important to clearly identify the article, the topic, the question or purpose of the article, and its thesis or findings. The body paragraphs for a summary of an argumentative article will explain how arguments and evidence support the thesis. Alternatively, the body paragraphs of an empirical article summary may explain the methods and findings, making connections to predictions. The conclusion explains the significance of the argument or implications of the findings. This structure ensures that your summary is focused and clear.

Professors will often give you a list of required topics to include in your summary and/or explain how they want you to organize your summary. Make sure you read the assignment sheet with care and adapt the sample outlines below accordingly.

---

### Sample Outline for an Argumentative Article Summary

- I. Introduction
  - A. General topic of article
  - B. Author's research question or approach to the topic
- II. Author's thesis
- III. Main points
  - A. Explain some key points and how they support the thesis
  - B. Provide a key example or two that the author uses as evidence to support these points
- IV. Conclusion
  - A. Review how the main points work together to support the thesis?
  - B. How does the author explain the significance or implications of his/her article?

### Sample Outline for an Empirical Article Summary

- I. Introduction
  - A. General topic of study
  - B. Author's research question
  - C. Variables and hypotheses
- II. Methods
  - A. Participants
  - B. Experiment design
  - C. Materials used

- III. Findings and discussion (could be 2 paragraphs)
  - A. Key results
  - B. Did the results support the hypotheses?
- IV. Conclusion
  - A. Implications or applications of the study
  - B. Major limitations of the study

---

#### For Example

The paragraph below is an example of an introductory paragraph from a summary of an empirical article:

Tavernier and Willoughby's (2014) study explored the relationships between university students' sleep and their intrapersonal, interpersonal, and educational development. While the authors cited many scholars who have explored these relationships, they pointed out that most of these studies focused on unidirectional correlations over a short period of time. In contrast, Tavernier and Willoughby tested whether there was a bidirectional or unidirectional association between participants' sleep quality and duration and several psychosocial factors including intrapersonal adjustment, friendship quality, and academic achievement. Further they conducted a longitudinal study over a period of three years in order to determine whether there were changes in the strength or direction of these associations over time. They predicted that sleep quality would correlate with measures of intrapersonal adjustment, friendship quality, and academic achievement; they further hypothesized that this correlation would be bidirectional: sleep quality would predict psychosocial measures and at the same time, psychosocial measures would predict sleep quality.

#### Writing the Summary

One significant challenge in writing an article summary is deciding what information or examples from the article to include. Remember, article summaries are much shorter than the article itself. You do not have the space to explain every point the author makes. Instead, you will need to explain the author's main points and find a few excellent examples that illustrate these points.

You should also keep in mind that article summaries need to be written in your own words. Scholarly writing can use complex terminology to explain complicated ideas, which makes it difficult to understand and to summarize correctly. In the face of difficult text, many students tend to use direct quotations, saving them the time and energy required to understand and reword it. However, a summary requires you to summarize, which means "to state briefly or succinctly" (*Oxford English Dictionary*) the main ideas presented in a text. The brevity must come from you, in your own words, which demonstrates that you understand the article.

---