

## Critical Summary Directions

**What is a critical summary?** In popular usage, most of us tend to think of a summary as a condensed explanation of *what* a text says, but a college-level *critical* summary entails more than the simple listing of an author's ideas. It also requires us to think carefully about *how* and *why* the writer is making her point(s) as a means of better understanding what the text is attempting to do and how it is operating in its cultural context. Summary is an exercise in comprehension and critical thinking.

“Summarizing isn't simply the unanalytical reporting of information; it's more than just shrinking someone else's words. To write an accurate summary, you have to ask analytical questions, such as the following:

- Which of the ideas in the reading are most significant? Why?
- How do these ideas fit together?
- What do the key passages in the reading mean?

Summarizing is, then, like paraphrasing, a tool of understanding and not just a mechanical task.”  
(*Rosenwasser and Stephen, Writing Analytically, 96*)

When writing a summary, you'll be explaining what the author has to say about the topic at hand, **but also** how she articulates and supports her arguments, **and** ultimately why she is compelled to do so. Here are a few more questions, in addition to the above, that you can use when brainstorming to write a critical summary:

How would you describe the tone of the essay?

How do you imagine her readers might respond to her ideas?

Why did she feel the need to make her argument/point?

How is the text organized, and why was it presented this way?

What context or conversation is this author responding to?

What makes (or doesn't make) her seem trustworthy or knowledgeable?

**How do I write a critical summary?** To write a good critical summary, try to include answers to all of the above questions. Your summary should not be too long—about one-two pages, double-spaced.

It helps to begin by brainstorming or mapping out answers to the questions before writing.

Start by naming the author, title, genre, and audience.

Next, quickly explain what the text was about.

Finally, start moving through the questions on the handout above, answering them as you go.

You can reorganize your thoughts/ideas, if needed, after drafting.

Include an MLA citation for the text, and place it at the top of your summary. Be sure that you use MLA rules for formatting, heading, citing, and page numbers.