



## Writing summaries

This handout gives tips on how to write a summary of any kind of text, whether newspaper article or film. There are tips on how to structure a summary, how to keep the summary separate from your own comment, and there are useful English expressions.

- (1) General comments on writing a summary
- (2) Writing a summary of an editorial
- (3) Writing a summary and comment on a documentary film
- (4) Writing a summary and comment on a book
- (5) Writing a summary and comment on a feature film

### **(1) General comments on writing a summary**

What is the point of writing a summary?

To pass on information quickly to someone who does not know the text.

You might think you will never have to write a summary in real life, but isn't that part of what you have to do when you write a good paper („Hausarbeit“)? First you have to read, then you have to extract the main points, and only then are you able to report and finally interpret. So I think it is a skill worth acquiring.

There are many different types of text e.g. an email, a telegram, a recipe, a novel, a textbook, a doctoral dissertation, a cartoon. Before you start writing a summary, think first about the type of text you are being asked to summarise. What are the characteristics, typical features of this type of text?

## (2) Writing a summary of an editorial

Typically, in an editorial the writer will put forward their personal opinion on a topic of current interest and will refer to current events when presenting this opinion. The writer will take it for granted that the readers will share this background information and that they will be “in the picture“. So don't expect to understand everything you read in an editorial in a newspaper from another country. Your job is to try to get the basic message.

The following expressions are useful when you are summarising a text with an opinion such as an editorial.

- **Topic**

*The writer is putting forward his opinion on .....*

- **Argument**

*He claims / argues / contends / that ....*

*According to the writer .....*

- **Reasons, justification, support**

*He points to .....*

*He points to the fact that .....*

*He cites findings from .....*

*He refers to (events, statistics, other people etc) .....*

- **Conclusion, message**

*He concludes that .....*

Task:

Imagine you had the task of summarising the editorials of several different newspapers, all written on the same topic, so that the editors' opinions could be compared.

Language notes: The following are good examples of how to use some key words correctly.

Can you explain why some people wrote a “Nacherzaehlung“ instead of a summary?

(Can you name all the Chancellors of the Federal Republic?)

One of the most commonly cited examples of Fantasy writing is “Lord of the Rings“.

People sometimes quote the Bible to make a point e.g. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.“

Some people claim / contend / argue / maintain / that the new B.A. courses will be more effective than the old degree courses.

They point to the fact that these courses are shorter.

However, there is no evidence as yet that B.A. courses are more effective.

(If you see a crime being carried out, you will probably have to go to court and give evidence.)

According to the writer, the new B.A. courses are a success.

### **(3) Writing a summary and comment on a documentary film**

As with all summaries you have to understand the point of the “text“. You have to be able to pick out the main points and leave out the details. This can be quite difficult with a documentary as often there are many people interviewed, and frequent jumps back and forward in time and place. You might also have to deal with the problem of a variety of accents.

Where you are expected to write a summary and a comment you also have to take care to keep your summary separate from your comment.

Here are some tips for structuring your summary and comment, and some useful English expressions.

- **Introduce the documentary**

A brief introductory paragraph giving the what, when, where, who

*This documentary is about / is concerned with / deals with /.....*

*It concentrates on / focuses on .....*

*The people interviewed are .....*

*etc.*

- **Give some more information on the content** of the documentary

Write two or three paragraphs, giving some details of some of the main aspects / people focused on.

*One of the people interviewed is .....  
He/she talks about .... / thinks that/ is of the opinion that  
.....  
etc.*

- **Write your own personal comment** on the documentary.  
What do you think its message is? What did you like/dislike, find (un)convincing, well or badly researched, well or badly presented, objective or subjective etc.

*As far as I am concerned (the film is .....)  
As I see it (the film is .....)  
In my opinion (the film is .....)  
I think / I feel (that the director wanted to .....)  
I find (the film very interesting)*

*What interested me / annoyed me most was .....  
What I think is missing is .....  
etc.*

Here is a sample framework for writing a summary and comment on a documentary film.

“The Miracle Workers” is a documentary series made by ..... in 1981 about .....  
This episode “They sincerely wanted to be rich” is about/ is concerned with/ deals with/ ..... and focuses on/ concentrates on .....

There are several different locations, including ..... and .....  
The people interviewed are from industry, ..... and .....

The topics dealt with are ..... and ..... and .....

One of these interviews is with ..... who talks about /discusses ..... (S)He thinks that / is of the opinion that .....  
Another interview is with .....

The interviewer asks the questions, and makes comments on .....

In my opinion the film is .....  
I found the film .....  
For me the film conveys the message that ..... / I think the director wanted to .....

What I think is missing is ....  
What interested me / annoyed me most was .....

## (4) Writing a summary and comment on a book

Here, where you are expected to write a summary and a comment you have to take care to keep your summary separate from your comment.

- **Introduce the book**

An introductory paragraph giving the place and time and the bare bones of the story:

Where/when is the book set?

What is it about?

- **Summarise the story**

This is not a retelling of the whole story, simply a choice of the events and/or characters which are in your opinion the most important ones.

- **Main themes**

NB: According to Cobuild

"A theme in a piece of writing, a talk, or a discussion is an important idea or subject that runs through it."

"A theme in an artist's work of literature is an idea in it that the artist or writer develops or repeats."

What are for you the main themes of the book?

Don't just list them; explain, enlarge. For example, saying the main theme is "love" or "friendship" is not enough. It is too vague. There must be thousands of books in which "love" or "friendship" is a main theme. But each book takes a different perspective and probably conveys a different message.

You might see the main theme as "the love of a grandfather for his grandchildren and how this love keeps them all alive despite poverty etc." or "the friendship that develops among four teenagers in a run-down inner-city school" and then you would go on to expand on this. Tell me more! Whatever themes you see, please explain so that someone who has not read the book can understand.

- **Your personal comment on the book**

What effect did the book have on you? What is special about this book for you? What interested you particularly, and why? Why did you choose to write about this one?

## **Some useful language for your summary and comment on a book**

This should help you structure your text and express your opinions, but of course you do not have to use all these expressions. You may have better ideas!

*The story is set in (London) in the (nineties)...*

*The book is about / tells the story of / deals with / shows ...*

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*The book begins with / opens with ... /At the beginning ...*

*Later / As a result /...*

*Finally ... / At the end ....*

*The book does not have a clear chronological order. First we see ....*

*There are many flashbacks ....*

*The perspective changes. First we see things from the point of view of (character X) but later we see .....*

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*It seems to me that / In my opinion / I feel / I think the main themes of the book are ...*

*This can be seen clearly in the part where ....*

*For me, the message of the book is that .... / I think the book is saying that ...*

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*I found the book ... I chose this book because .....*

*The most outstanding part for me is when ... / One of the most significant parts for me is ... / X is one of the most (.....) characters I have ever found in a book ....*

## (5) Writing a summary and comment on a feature film

Here, just as with the summary and comment on a book in (4), where you are expected to write a summary and a comment you have to take care to keep your summary separate from your comment.

- **Introduce the film**

An introductory paragraph giving the place and time and the bare bones of the story:

Where/when is the film set?

What is it about?

*The film is set in (London) in the (nineties)...*

*It is about / tells the story of / deals with / shows ...*

- **Summarise the story**

This is not a retelling of the whole story, simply a choice of the events and/or characters which are in your opinion the most important ones.

*The film begins with / opens with ... /At the beginning ...*

*Later / As a result /...*

*Finally ... / At the end ....*

*The film does not have a clear chronological order. First we see ....*

*There are many flashbacks ....*

*The perspective changes. First we see things from the point of view of (character X) but later we see .....*

- **Main themes**

NB: According to Cobuild

"A theme in a piece of writing, a talk, or a discussion is an important idea or subject that runs through it."

"A theme in an artist's work of literature is an idea in it that the artist or writer develops or repeats."

What are for you the main themes of the film ? Read again the notes on themes in (4).

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*It seems to me that / In my opinion / I feel / I think the main themes of the film are ...*

*This can be seen clearly in the scene(s) where ....*

*For me, the message of the book is that .... / I think the film is saying that ...*

- **Your personal comment on the film**

What effect did the film have on you? What is special about this film for you? What interested you particularly, and why? Why did you choose to write about this one? Did it remind you of any other film you have seen, or book you have read?

*I chose this film because .....*

*I found this film .....*

*The most outstanding part for me is when ... / One of the most significant parts for me is ... / X is one of the most (.....) characters I have ever found in a film ....*

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