4.2 Summary

Summary is a widely used rhetorical tool that isn’t limited to book reports and essay exams. Everywhere around us, we can find summary being used to communicate ideas: movie commercials and theater trailers often tease audiences with just enough plot and character information to inspire interest, while the reviewers who critique these films provide synopses that help to illustrate the films’ strengths and weaknesses. Episodes of TV dramas often begin with “Previously on...” summaries of previous episodes or seasons. The back cover of a book might include a plot synopsis to catch the attention of potential readers, and academic articles are often preceded by abstracts, outlining the whole argument in a few sentences.

However, effective summaries aren’t just a random collection of high points. A good summary can (and often does) serve a greater purpose than simply providing a quick overview of the text. The best summaries arrange information around a specific rhetorical goal, often dictated by the purpose, genre, and audience of the particular text.

4.2.1 Purposeful Summarizing

Summaries usually focus on the most important elements of a text, but what’s important is often dependent on what the summary is trying to accomplish. “Previously on...”-style synopses for TV shows don’t revisit every character and plot point in the show’s history; they usually include only the information and events that are vital to understanding the episode you’re about to watch. No matter the genre, effective summaries tend to follow this example, providing a selective overview in order to achieve the writer’s rhetorical purpose.

Summaries can also function as a kind of storytelling shorthand. For example, montages are often used in visual texts to illustrate in a few minutes events that take much longer to develop in the actual film. This kind of summary serves a greater function than simply saying to the audience, “This is what happened.” The purpose of a montage is often to intrigue potential viewers with a condensed understanding of the plot, drawing them into the story.

Often the genre of the text will dictate the information that can or should be included in the summary. A film review may give a plot synopsis in order to analyze its good and bad aspects, but will almost never give away its ending, since the purpose of a film review is to help readers decide if they want to see the movie. If a review needs to give away the ending, you’ll usually get a “spoiler alert.” A critical essay in a film studies journal isn’t bound by the same conventions, and may summarize the film’s surprise ending in order to support the argument. Academic articles often contain another form of summary called an abstract, a brief paragraph containing the writer’s primary argument, along with a brief description of its main supporting points. After reading such an article, 39B and C students may be required to write an annotated bibliography, very briefly summarizing the article’s purpose, audience and usefulness in the field.

All of these forms of summary change the information they include based on audience. Movie previews for an action film might spend less time outlining the plot and more time on the shootouts, car chases, and explosions. The audience of a romantic comedy, on the other hand, might be drawn to time spent on the characters and the conflict that keeps them apart.

4.2.2 Summarizing in the Writing 39 Series

Each class in the Writing 39 series will require you to practice using some form of summary in order to develop your ideas. In 39A and 39B, you will need to write focused, brief summaries of elements in a text as a way to introduce evidence in your Rhetorical Analysis essay. You’ll also learn evaluative summarizing in the Annotated Bibliography assignment. You’ll expand that skill in 39C,
writing annotated bibliographies as a way to archive the ideas you’ve found in your sources. You’ll also summarize the arguments of others in your essays to support your own claim, or as grounds to refute another writer’s claim.

When composing a summary for your own work, keep in mind not only what your readers need to know, but also what they might want to know. If your reader is unfamiliar with the text you’re analyzing, your summary may need to be more comprehensive. Or your instructor may direct you to assume the reader is familiar with the text, so you need only to summarize in order to situate the reader in your argument, or so you can support and develop your point. In the following example, the student’s purpose was to provide an example within her glossary definition of the term imagery for the audience of her fellow 39B students.

The student uses a text from the class, so she knows her readers are familiar with it. Her summary is light-handed because of this: she’s using quotation in her summary just to orient the reader in the text so she can make her real point about one type of imagery. This is a common purpose of summary: using it as a setup for your own analysis.

**SAMPLE SUMMARY**

An example of auditory imagery can be seen in *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* when “the fox strained to hear another word, but there was nothing.” She wants to hear a more human sound, but “all she could hear was the whisper of the wind as it stirred the fallen leaves, the sighing of the trees as they breathed and swayed in the wind, and the distinct ting ting of the wind chimes in the little temple.” The peace of the sounds the fox hears after eavesdropping on the conversation of the creatures she comes across signifies the finality of the monk’s fate. Instead of hearing what she wants to hear, the fox hears only the peace of the countryside, which serves to worsen, rather than alleviate, her anxiety. The auditory imagery makes the moment more vivid.

**Questions to Ask When Writing Summaries**

1. Why am I summarizing?
2. Which details should I select for inclusion?
3. Is the summary accurate? Comprehensive enough for my purpose?

---

### 4.2.3 Annotated Bibliography

The basic purpose of the annotated bibliography assignment, like all Critical Reading assignments, is to help you learn to read more carefully and critically by identifying how a text is situated and constructed.

In addition to practicing effective summarizing and paraphrasing skills, creating an annotated bibliography requires careful assessment of an author’s qualifications, thesis, evidence, medium or genre, purpose, and audience, so you also gain good practice in identifying a text’s rhetorical situation, thus laying the groundwork for a more detailed analysis.

The language of an annotated bibliography must be precise and concise, and therefore you will also learn how to write with an economy of style. Your instructor may even ask you to write, peer review, and revise your annotated bibliographies.

Furthermore, in researched arguments, which you will construct in 39B and even more so in 39C, annotated bibliographies can help you to evaluate the usefulness and relevance of your sources, and also help you to remember information from them when you are actually writing your paper.

**The Four-Sentence Pattern for Annotated Bibliographies**

For the purposes of your composition courses, you will be expected to follow a specific pattern when you construct your ABs—a highly structured, four-sentence paragraph adapted from the format first advocated by Margaret K. Woodworth in her article “The Rhetorical Precis.” The pattern is based on the rhetorical triangle; it requires you to identify particular rhetorical elements of the text that start from the “angle” or perspective of the rhetor.

**Bibliographic Citation.** Begin your annotation by identifying the source being annotated as you would in an entry to a Works Cited page in correct MLA style. If you found your source online, even if it was originally published in print, be sure to indicate which database you used, and when you accessed it, according to MLA guidelines.

**SAMPLE ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY: THE CITATION**


After the bibliographic citation, write the following four sentences formatted into a single paragraph. Remember to double-space your paragraph, just as you would any formal academic writing assignment.

Sentence #1 establishes the rhetor's credentials and thesis. Introduce the rhetor using biographic information that establishes the rhetor's credibility and provides a brief summary of the rhetor's thesis or message. Be sure to use the rhetor's full name, synthesize the most impressive, relevant details of his or her biography into a brief phrase, and follow this by a that clause and an accurate signal verb, such as argues, asserts, challenges, or contends, to introduce your thesis summary.

Avoid phrases that simply lead to identification of the rhetor's topic such as "the author writes about" or "the author says that." To give more significance to your claim, you should also include the rationale behind the author's thesis. You can do so by adding a because clause; for example, "the author argues that x because y."

Sentence #1: CREDENTIALS AND THESIS

Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla, a noted Film and Cinema Professor and Spanish language scholar, argues that following classical conventions, the hero or heroine of current films often undergoes either a figurative or literal journey into hell in order to achieve his or her full potential as a hero and to complete a substantial amount of growth essential to his or her character.

Peer Editing Practice

1. How effectively does the writer establish Sánchez-Escalonilla's credibility? What specific information is most relevant to establishing particular expertise for the subject of the article? (Look at the title to remind yourself about the subject.)

2. Assuming the information is correct, how clearly is the thesis summarized?

3. How effectively does the writer use economy of language? Is there anything that could be cut?

Sentence #2 identifies the medium and genre. Classify the text according to medium—a film, a book, a general circulation news magazine, a scholarly journal, the internet—and by genre—gothic novel, Japanese anime, film review, academic criticism, YouTube video—and note whether the text challenges the conventions of the genre in any significant way.

The information in this sentence can help you figure out the intended audience and by extension, the message of the text. Media critic Marshall McLuhan is famous for saying, "The medium is the message." In essence, this means that what we communicate is fundamentally shaped by how and to whom it is conveyed by the rhetorical constraints of the medium.

Sentence #2: MEDIUM AND GENRE

Escalonilla constructs a thesis-driven academic argument for a scholarly journal in the field of popular media criticism.

Peer Editing Practice

1. Is there anything else about the medium or genre of the text that should be added, corrected, or revised?

2. How might you revise the language to make it more concise and precise?

Sentence #3 lists the types of evidence the rhetor uses and explains how the evidence is used to support the thesis or convey the message. Notice that you are not asked to quote any evidence directly. The point here is not to parrot what's been said, but to summarize what kinds of evidence are used. Examples of evidence include: statistics and data, analysis (logical, rhetorical, cultural, historical, etc.), quotes from authorities, references to other scholars in the field, narratives (anecdotes) that are used as examples, lists, definitions, and more.

Often, the genre or intended audience will dictate the kinds of evidence that a rhetor uses. Scholarly journals require more rigorous standards of evidence and consequently appeal to their audiences differently than newspaper articles or novels. For example, an anecdote aims for a different kind of appeal (pathos) than raw data from a scientific study (logos). If you're unsure of genre or audience, try working backwards from the type of evidence the rhetor uses and its particular rhetorical appeal to help you determine the genre and audience.

Sentence #3: TYPES OF EVIDENCE

In order to prove the importance of the Journey, Escalonilla cites numerous stories of heroes in his work, beginning with ancient Greek myths to modern literature such as the cinematic journeys of The Lord of the Rings, E.T., and Groundhog Day.
You may find the AB’s four-sentence format confusing at first; for example, it may seem much easier to describe the author’s thesis in three or four sentences rather than just one (and usually it is easier to do this). The value of sticking to the format, however, is that you’ll learn to provide a concise summary of the most important parts of a text—this is an essential tool for writing both analytical and researched arguments, where it is often necessary to provide “snapshots” of texts for your readers (such as when you first introduce a text) rather than engaging in drawn-out summary.

If you have trouble writing just one sentence for each category, practice writing longer and more complex sentences, rather than giving up and straying from the format. Once you have the content down, work on cutting out unnecessary words and combining ideas to streamline your sentences.

### Annotated Bibliography Rubric

- Does each sentence accurately represent the text being annotated?
- Are the sentences comprehensive in their coverage? (i.e., is the full thesis described in sentence 1; are all the major types of evidence cited in sentence 3?)
- Are the sentences written clearly, with precise diction?
- Are the sentences succinct and well-focused on the appropriate subject?
- Is the bibliographic citation presented in accurate MLA format?

### 4.3 Description

Description is a bit like summary, because in both, you are attempting to capture the essence of the thing being summarized. However, description is more specifically about sharing how something looks, smells, sounds, feels, or tastes—using the senses. In your experiences as a writing student, you may have seen the phrase “show, don’t tell” jotted in the margins of your paper. This is a favorite comment with writing teachers not only because description makes for a lively reading experience, but also because it informs the purpose of your text and refines your address to a particular audience.