

Strategies for Summarizing Informational Texts

This quick reference describes the steps a reader should take when summarizing expository texts. When we summarize purely informational texts, we want to account for the main ideas. Because informational texts can be content heavy, we will need to read carefully for the most important content. Not all the information in the text is important. Seek to understand the reading and writing tasks. Establishing a purpose for reading will help narrow our focus as we make decisions about what we should include in our summaries. The following steps will help us complete this type of reading and writing assignment.

- Step 1:** Seek to understand the reading and writing task.
What are you expected to know and do? What are you summarizing?
- Step 2:** Carefully read the text.
Read the text once to get a general idea of what the text is about.
- Step 3:** Reread and mark the text.
Circle terms and underline information relevant to the reading and writing tasks.
- Step 4:** Pause to connect ideas within the text.
Chart individual paragraphs in order to gain insight into what the author is saying and how he or she says or connect what is said to the visuals in the text. Ask questions such as, "How does this section connect to the previous section?" or "What does this idea have to do with that idea?"
- Step 5:** Write summary statements in the margin.
*What is this paragraph (or section) about?
What is the author saying?
What is the author doing in this paragraph (or section)?*

Consider the following when summarizing informational text:

- Ideas are typically presented in the order that they appear in the text; however, you may need to present ideas in a different order if it makes sense to do so.
- Refer to your markings, summary statements, and any other comments you made as you craft your summary.
- Use accurate verbs, such as defining, illustrating, or introducing, to describe what an author is doing in a paragraph or section of text.
- Include important content and lesson-based vocabulary.
- Account for the main ideas in the text. We should include enough information so that someone who has not read the text would understand the main points.
- Use your own words and paraphrase when necessary. Ideas taken directly from the source should be properly quoted and cited.
- What we quote and how we quote it will depend on the actual discipline. For example, a science paper will have far fewer direct quotations than an English or social science paper. As a general rule, we should directly quote ideas that cannot be expressed accurately through paraphrasing or summarizing.
- Write objectively. Be sensitive to biases; avoid inaccurate interpretations or representations. We should express the ideas in the text fairly and accurately.
- Summaries should be read for clarity and accuracy.
- Summaries should not be more than one-fourth to one-third the length of the original text.



Summarizing Sections of Informational Texts

This activity is designed to support students as they learn how to summarize expository texts. The work presented here could be done in students' Cornell notes.

Title of Text: _____ Author: _____
Type of Text: _____ Paragraph(s) #: _____

1. What is this paragraph or section about? What is it saying?

- *This section is about...*
- *This section discusses...*
- *This paragraph is*
- *He (or she) begins with...*

2. On the lines below, record information from the reading that is relevant to your reading purpose.

- *The author presents some ideas...*
- *In the section (insert subtitle here), we learn that...*
- *The main idea of this passage is...*
- *Paragraph two introduces (or it might do some other work)...*

3. Use this space to craft a concise summary sentence(s) that includes the ideas from questions 1 and 2.



Sample Summary of an Expository Text

This page provides an authentic summary paragraph written by a sophomore college prep student from El Cajon Valley High School. The student was responding to the following reading and writing task:

George Russell, a writer for Time magazine, accounts for the eruption of Nevado del Ruiz in his article “Colombia’s Mortal Agony.” While reading the article, mark the text: circle names and numbers and underline what witnesses say. In a paragraph (or two), summarize Russell’s account of this event. What is his purpose for writing this article? What does Russell do to bring this tragic event to life for his readers?

The student who wrote the summary below was given a template to help him organize his thoughts and guide his analysis. (See page 2 of this Quick Reference for the template.) Minor changes were made to this summary. Read the sample below. What do you notice? What is this young writer doing? How does he do it?

A Summary of George Russell’s “Colombia’s Mortal Agony”¹

George Russell, in his article “Colombia’s Mortal Agony,” describes the tragic eruption of the volcano Nevado del Ruiz in 1985. Even though Russell discusses the causes of volcanic activity and mentions historic volcanic eruptions, his purpose for writing the article is to account for the catastrophic event that killed nearly 20,000 Colombian people. Russell brings this tragic event to life through the use of descriptive language and powerful eyewitness testimonies. In the article, Russell provides details about the towns devastated by the flood of water, ash, and mud that thundered down the 17,716 ft. volcano. He explains that Armero, a town 30 miles from Nevado del Ruiz, experienced the most loss in both life and property. Toward the end of the article, Russell personalizes the event when he introduces Omaira Sanchez, a 13-year-old girl who eventually dies after being stuck in the mud for two days. George Russell writes this article in order to help us understand the destructive power of volcanoes and to share the catastrophic event that became “Colombia’s mortal agony.”

¹Russell, G. (2005, April 18). Colombia’s mortal agony. *Time Magazine*, Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1050626-1,00.html>



Sample Summary Template for “Columbia’s Mortal Agony”

_____, in his article _____
(Author’s full name) (article title)

_____s _____
(verb)

Even though _____ discusses _____
(author’s last name)

his purpose for writing his article is _____

_____ brings the tragic event to life through/by _____
(author’s last name)

In his article, _____ provides details about _____
(author’s last name)

He explains that _____

George Russell writes this article in order to _____

