

Summary + Analysis

Summary and analysis are two crucial **ways of responding** to the ideas of others, whether those ideas are presented in readings, lectures, discussions, videos, or some other medium or format.

Because responding to the ideas of others is at the heart of learning and participating in the conversation of a given field, it is important to understand **what** summary and analysis are, **how** they are different, and **why** they matter.

What is summary?

A summary is a condensed version of a passage, reading, lecture, etc. that captures only the most essential information. It captures the **WHAT** of a text:

- What is the topic of the text? What is it about?
- What is the author's position on that topic? What is the thesis or argument?
- What representative examples does the author use to illustrate or support their position?

Summaries should be short and primarily in your own words. Use direct quotes selectively and judiciously to support and extend your ideas. In other words, don't let long quotes do your work for you. Instead, when you summarize, get in the habit of paraphrasing material from original texts, or putting it into your own words and sentence structures. If you are unfamiliar with what paraphrase is, check out our guide "Patchwriting versus Paraphrasing."

Summaries should also be fair (Lunsford 115). In other words, a summary should accurately convey the writer's purpose, tone, and meaning, *even if you object to their ideas or style*. Don't worry -- you will have the opportunity to critique the piece, if you want to, in your analysis.

Where does summary go in an essay? How long should a summary be?

Great questions! The answers, however, are really context-dependent. Summaries can be woven into the texture of an essay as you introduce new sources and ideas in the course of developing an argument. A summary might be just one sentence, or even part of a sentence used to introduce a quote. Alternatively, a summary might be a full paragraph. **As a general rule of thumb, think about summary coming before analysis.** Summary is also a key component to most conclusions, where you sum up the main ideas of your paper. Thus, the shape and location of your summaries will vary within and across different texts.

Why is summary useful?

A concise yet thorough summary shows readers that you have understood and can reliably talk about and respond to the ideas/texts under discussion. In this way, summary can act as a measure of your own **reading comprehension**. It can also save your readers the time and effort of reading another source completely. At the same time, **summary is often the foundation or precursor to analysis**; before you launch into an argument about a text, readers will want to know what the text is about first.

Creating summaries is also a good skill to practice, because you can use summary in so many different ways and in different contexts. You may find yourself using summary in the course of your research process to keep track of sources, as a part of annotated bibliographies, in response papers, and as a tool for introductions and/or conclusions (Lunsford 759).

What is analysis?

Analysis involves taking a position about a text (or theory or idea, etc.) and making claims about it. These claims **explore the HOW and the WHY of a text**. You can also think of analysis as interpretation based in evidence, rather than in personal biases or reactions (Center for Academic Success). As you analyze a text, think about the following:

- **How does the text work** in terms of the rhetorical strategies or literary devices that it uses? In other words, what does the author do in the text, or how does the author use or organize language in order to communicate? How does the author build a theme or position in the text? For example, you could analyze this guide by exploring how it adapts a Q & A format for asynchronous communication.
- **Why is the text important or useful?** How has the text changed your thinking? What specific perspective does it contribute, and why is that significant? Why should other readers pay attention to this text?

Note that if you are analyzing visual compositions, like a film or video, you will make use of a visual vocabulary, not just a textual one, to describe and analyze how the composition works.

Where does analysis go in an essay? How long should an analysis be?

Again, great questions, with context-specific answers. **An entire paper could be considered an analysis**, in that it takes up a central position on a topic in its thesis statement, and then it develops that argument throughout the whole paper with a series of supported claims. Creating an argument involves taking an analytical stance.

However, there may also be moments of “micro-analysis” throughout an essay, especially when you are introducing other sources, and quoting or paraphrasing them as evidence in support of your argument (or counter-argument!). It is important to always **analyze your evidence** in some way by making sense of it for your readers. Why are you introducing or quoting that source? What do you want readers to take away from the quotation or paraphrase? These moments of analysis should come after the evidence itself. For more on using information from other sources effectively, see our guide “Integrating Evidence from Other Sources into Your Writing.”

Alternatively, sometimes you may be assigned to do a more informal summary and analysis assignment outside of a formal essay requirement. These assignments may be described as reaction or even reflection papers, where you are expected to respond to a text or idea. Even though it might not be a formal paper with an intro, conclusion, or outside sources, these **response papers are crucial opportunities to begin to think critically**, to express your stance or position, and to analyze a text.

Why is analysis useful?

Analysis is your demonstration of **critical thinking**, your opportunity to exercise your own thinking in response to the ideas of others. In an academic context, readers are definitely interested in this! They want to know **what you think** about the assigned readings, or theories, or ideas discussed.

Why is it important to pay attention to the difference between summary and analysis?

You want to be in control of these moves, so that you can use them effectively in your academic writing.

- Perhaps you use a mini summary of an event or text as a way to segue to your topic in the introduction of your paper.
- Perhaps you begin to add more analysis after your in-text quotes to better develop your ideas.
- Perhaps you have gotten feedback that your papers rely too much on summary and not enough on analysis. In that case, you especially want to cultivate your awareness of when you are simply repeating **WHAT** a text says, and where you begin to say **HOW** it works, or **WHY** it matters.

Knowing the difference between summary and analysis and deploying them appropriately in your writing will make you a stronger, more persuasive writer.

Works Cited

Center for Academic Success. "Summary vs. Analysis." University of Illinois-Springfield.
<https://www.uis.edu/cas/thelearninghub/writing/handouts/research-methods/summary-vs-analysis/>.

Lunsford, Andrea. *The St. Martin's Handbook*. 9th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2021.