



## SUMMARIES

You may be asked to summarize:

- an article
- a chapter
- a full book

Usually (but not necessarily) you will be summarizing secondary literature.

## What is a Summary?

- A very condensed version of the assigned text.
  - (from half a page to maximum a page in length)
- You will retell the main argument of the author(s) in your own words.
- Unless specifically asked by your instructor, do NOT take a critical stance on the issue discussed in the text you have to summarize.

## How to write a summary?

- Identify the work:
  - ✓ Author
  - ✓ Title
  - ✓ Year of publication
- Identify its main thesis [check intro and conclusion for that].
- Skim through the text and notice its major divisions: chapters and/or subchapters, as well as titles and/or subtitles.
- Read each division carefully with the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How questions in mind.
- Jot down major points for each division/subdivision. Be specific & concise.
- Identify the sources used by the author(s) to back up the argument.

## BOOK REVIEW

You may be asked to review

- a book
- an article in a journal
- a chapter or more in a book.

Usually but not necessarily you will be reviewing a piece of secondary literature.

A review of a scholarly writing has two parts:

- the presentation of author's argument
- your assessment of the writing

## HOW TO WRITE A BOOK REVIEW

- Identify the book (author, title, year of publication).
- Identify the main issue or problem that the author addresses:
  - This is NOT the same with the 'thesis.'
  - Rather, tell WHAT is the issue raised in the book/article, and WHY has the author tackled it (i.e. to refute other scholars' opinions; to fill in a gap; to bring in a new perspective, etc.).
  - For this information, check the Preface or Forward (if any), and the Introduction.
- Identify the author's thesis (i.e. his or her answer given to the problem).
- Explain how the author proves or supports the thesis. (arguments + evidence used).

## HOW TO WRITE A BOOK REVIEW (ct'd)

How well does the author make his/her case?

- Your critique starts here.
- NOTE: Criticism does not have to be negative; you should evaluate objectively both the strengths and the weaknesses in the author's argument.
- Does the overall argument work? Explain why or why not.
  - ✓ Are the premises correct?
  - ✓ Does the conclusion follow up logically from them?
  - ✓ Are there parts that seem not sufficiently developed or compellingly proved?
  - ✓ Is evidence well analyzed and integrated in the argument? Is the author biased in the way he/she interprets primary sources?
- Is the argument persuasive?
  - ✓ Does the author deal in a convincing way with counterevidence, and/or with counterarguments to the points he or she makes?
- Is the work readable?
  - ✓ Discuss here the style and how well the author reaches his/her targeted audience.

## HOW TO WRITE A BOOK REVIEW (ct'd)

NOTE: Do NOT use such statements as "In my opinion," "In my view," "I think that," "I believe that," "I would argue that," etc.

Since it is your book review, the assumption is that it expresses your point of view. There is no need to emphasize it (it rather shows clumsiness and hesitation).

## Close Reading of Select Paragraphs

The process of writing an essay or a research paper usually begins with the close reading of a text.

What is close reading?

- It is the careful, engaged interpretation of a passage from a larger writing (a primary source in most cases).

When you close read, you observe facts, details and nuances.

- Each word matters, as each plays a role in conveying to you the general meaning of the text.
- Pay attention to all striking features of the text, including rhetorical devices, structural elements, cultural and historical references.

## How to close read a text?

- The text should be read once in full to get familiar with its main ideas.
- Reread it several times, slowly and paying attention to each word, its potential meanings, and its context.
  - ✓ Highlight anything that seems important.
  - ✓ Make notes on the margins of the text (this can range from a brief comment to one word to a question or exclamation mark).
  - ✓ Alternatively, you can make a brief sketch or outline of the text on a separate piece of paper.
- The next step is interpreting your notes and observations.
  - You will use inductive reasoning: i.e. move from the observation of particular facts and details (gathering of historical data ) to analysis and conclusion.

### *In-class Exercise*

For, in fact, Gaius Julius Maximinus, the governor of Trebellica, though he was practically illiterate, was the first common soldier to seize power as the choice of the legions. However, the senators also approved of this since they considered it dangerous for unarmed men to resist one backed by the army. His son, who had the same name, Gaius Julius Maximinus, was made Caesar.

(Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*)

### GAIUS IULIUS MAXIMINUS THRAX



- governor
- of Trebellica
- 'practically' illiterate
- first common soldier
- made emperor
- by the legions

## THE SENATE



- senators (back in Rome)
- had to approve the election
- since they did not have weapons to oppose the army
  - they had no control over the army
  - feared repercussions

## Roman Empire



His son was made Caesar.

## THE HISTORY PAPER

- There are three basic types of papers assigned in history classes:
  - The shorter response or reaction essay (anywhere between two and five pages in length).
  - The longer essay responding to a prompt (up to ten pages).
  - The research paper (between 10 and 20 pages, depending on the professor).

## General characteristics

1. A history paper addresses a historical problem or question:
  - A particular event or series of events leading to an important political, social or economic change (e.g. the events leading to the American War of Independence).
  - A trend or artistic movement with great impact on society (e.g. Renaissance in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany).
  - A personality who affected historical process in some radical way (e.g. Octavian Augustus' decision to turn the Roman Republic into an empire; George Bush's decision to invade Iraq).
2. A history paper makes an argument (i.e. takes a stand on the issue discussed and provides ample evidence to support it).
  - Vikings: Traders or Raiders?
  - Muslim in the Balkans: European or the Eternal Other?

### 3. An 'A' history paper:

- Starts with a catchy introductory paragraph (see HWC website for more on that).
  - This paragraph has a threefold role:
    - Introduces the issue to be discussed
    - States your position on it
    - Provides a blueprint or roadmap to the reader as to where you are headed (how you plan to tackle the question raised).
  - Follow the steps below:
    - Begin with a general statement about your topic.
    - Narrow the focus with a more specific statement.
    - State your clear, concise, ARGUABLE thesis.
    - Set up the main themes, points, or opinions you are going to address in order to prove your thesis.

- An 'A' history paper has a strong thesis.
  - A thesis is NOT
    - A statement of a fact:  
e.g. There are many more women in Obama's administration than in any other government in US history.
    - A declaration of intention:  
e.g. In this paper I will discuss the role of women in Obama's administration.
  - A thesis makes takes a position that requires defending.  
e.g. Although there are more women in Obama's administration than in any other eras in US history, their voices are barely heard and their impact on internal social and economic policies is practically null.

### An 'A' history paper also:

- Has a good balance between summary and analysis
  - Gives the basics: WHO did WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW AND WHY.
  - Provides a well-rounded analysis of causes, immediate consequences and long-term significance.
- Integrates well quotations or paraphrases from primary/secondary sources:
  - Does not simply 'drop' a few lines from an author, and moves on.
  - Provides a context for the quote or paraphrase, then interprets it for the reader.
  - Always credits (i.e. cites in footnotes) the sources used.
- Addresses possible counterarguments.
- Ends with an effective conclusion which does not merely repeat the introduction. It also tells the reader why the argument really matters.

**NOTE I:** A history paper is NOT the high-school five-paragraph essay. You will have as many paragraphs as needed to prove your thesis.

Follow the rule: one paragraph = one main idea.

Make sure that each paragraph has a topic sentence (mini-thesis), supporting details, and a conclusion.

Pay attention to have smooth transitions from one paragraph to the next.

**NOTE II: In a history paper, you must keep all verbs in the PAST TENSE.**

**The only times when you will be using the present tense is:**

- When quoting from your sources, if the original is in present tense
- When introducing/discussing scholars views

## The Reaction/ Response paper

- If there is any one word that characterizes this type of history assignments is FOCUSED.
  - Do not waste energy, time and pages with details or themes unrelated to the topic you need to address.
- Usually, but not necessarily, you will be asked to react to (i.e. ANALYZE) one or more primary sources.

- In most cases, the instructor will provide you with a prompt. Some are very specific:
  - Using the *Hymn to Athen* and you readings from the Old Testament as your sources, discuss monotheism in ancient Egypt and ancient Israel. To what extent are they similar, how do they differ? What was the political, social and cultural impact of monotheistic beliefs in these societies?
- You are being asked to:
  - Compare and contrast the two (similarities and differences).
  - Examine how monotheism shaped the Egyptian and Israelite societies.
- Make sure you base your analysis on the primary sources, as indicated in the prompt.

- Other prompts can be more vague:
  - e.g. Based on the primary sources assigned for this week, write a brief (3-4 pages) reaction paper on the situation of women in colonial Latin America (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries).
- This prompt lets you choose the theme(s) on which to focus. You can only deal with two or three.
- You can use some of the following:
  - Family life
  - Socio-economic life
  - Political life
- You may also wish to pay attention to differences by race, socio-economic status, place of living (city vs. countryside), etc.

- Sometimes your professor will simply ask you to turn in a reaction paper to the sources assigned for that day, with no further instructions on the topic he or she is interested in.
  - Remember to stay focused. Read carefully the sources and decide what theme appears in all of them that can be the topic of your reaction paper.
    - e.g. You may have read several letters written by Napoleon Bonaparte, by his wife Josephine and by his sister Pauline. Can you find some common thread? How do they all regard Napoleon's plans to expand his empire into Egypt? How do each of them justify the conquest?
    - OR
    - What was the role of female relatives in Napoleon's political decisions? Did these women influence him?
  - The way you will approach your reaction paper will depend entirely on your sources: what information they provide you with. Do not raise questions to which your assigned readings do not and cannot respond.

Depending on the topic of the class, especially if it concerns modern or contemporary history, you may have to respond to one or more secondary sources (positions expressed by scholars in articles or books).

e.g. You read and have to respond to three articles written by three different historians on the causes and effects of resorting to nuclear weapons against Japan at the end of WWII.

1. Consider texts individually:

- The main problem or issue addressed by the author
- His/her thesis,
- Evidence used and how
- Possible counterarguments
- Strengths and weaknesses
- RESPOND to the author (agree/ disagree – explain why)

2. Consider texts collectively:

- How do they relate to one another? Do the authors agree? Disagree? Address different aspects of an issue? Formulate a problem in different ways?
- Does reading the claims made by several authors advance your understanding of the issue?

## The Longer Essay Answering a Prompt

Such essays usually require you to use the primary and secondary sources assigned for the class, but NOT to do research work.

e.g. **Explain the origins of the Chinese civil war of 1945-1949. How did the differing political programs of the two contenders affect the outcome of the conflict?**

- Read the entire prompt carefully.
- Highlight the main issues raised by the question.
  - Make sure you address ALL of them in your paper.
  - For each issue, jot down the main points you will be making.
- List the sources that you will be using to support your answer.
  - For each source, mark the specific lines or paragraphs that you will be quoting or paraphrasing.
  - Make sure to 1) introduce them effectively in your argument; 2) cite them accordingly.

## The Research Paper

### 1) *Decide what topic interests you:*

- Read through the syllabus. Scan the list of weekly readings. Does anything jump out at you as a potentially interesting topic?
- Think about your own interests: what type of issues generally raises your attention?
  - Do you enjoy reading about political history and/or military encounters?
  - Or do you prefer to delve on matters involving society, culture or religion?
  - Do you like writings with a more personal take, such as letters or diaries, or do you prefer theological debates?
- Plan to spend some time in YRL. Get yourself familiar with the library holdings on the topic.

## 2) Define your research question and identify relevant bibliography :

- You should first come up with a BASIC HISTORICAL QUESTION.
  - Do NOT try to formulate a thesis or an argument *before* you have even read and analyzed your sources.
  - Your question must be clear, concise, complex and arguable, centered on one main idea.
  
- An example of a non-researchable question is:
 

Why was there so much violence during the Middle Ages?

The question cannot be answered since it is too general and imprecise
  
- You can turn this unanswerable question into a research question by narrowing down its focus:
 

How did the twelfth-century papacy deal with the violence prevalent among its subjects?

Still broad, but it suggests directions you could take to answer it.

### To further narrow down your topic:

- Consult some general introductions to the Middle Ages and medieval war & violence.
- Search for primary sources from the 12<sup>th</sup> century

After some serious reading on the topic, you can revise the question for further precision:

How did the papal policies known as ‘Truce of God’ and ‘Peace of God’ affect warfare among Frankish lords and knights in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century?

### NOTE I: Online research

- Be aware that most articles posted on the World Wide Web have NOT been written by people trained as historians and as such are **highly unreliable**. They express personal opinions and are not the result of thorough scholarly research.
- As for **Wikipedia entries**, be very cautious as to how you use them.
  - The scholarly credentials of those posting materials on Wikipedia are not checked by any academic forum, so you can never be sure of the reliability of the information posted there.
  - The most a Wikipedia article may offer to you is background information on a given topic, some links to online primary sources, and a list of scholarly books and articles.
  - As long as you understand to use Wikipedia strictly as a gateway to resources and NOT as a source in itself, you are on the safe side of academic research.
- A good place to look for articles is the **JSTOR database**, which includes pdf files of many articles on Reformation. Very recent articles you may find only in the printed journals housed by YRL. For your research use only articles published by scholarly journals.

### NOTE II: Library Research

- Plan to spend time in the library. Find several books that address the topic of your interest in the online catalog, locate them on the library shelves, and begin exploring them:
  - look at the table of contents, chapter titles and subtitles;
  - read the introduction and conclusion;
  - skim through the book;
  - check the bibliography.
- Make good use of the bibliography provided, which offers you further suggestions for primary and secondary sources.
- The more familiar you get with the issues discussed by scholars and the resources available for further investigation, the easier will become for you to narrow down your topic.