Summary vs. Analysis

The Center

A common difficulty for college students is the difference between summary and analysis.

Summaries

To summarize means to put the main idea and key points of a text into your own words. Summaries:

- Are briefer than the original text
- Typically use the third person point of view (Jared states...)
- Have a neutral, objective tone
- Do not judge the author’s ideas (You will not say, “I think” or “I believe”)  
- Focus only on main ideas and/or key points

Reading to Summarize

When reading the text for your summary, read with that purpose in mind! Note-taking is an essential reading skill that will help you write your summary.

1) First, identify the author’s thesis or main idea. Underline it.
2) Next, divide the text into major ideas. Label the major ideas: 1st, 2nd, 3rd
3) Then, identify some minor points. Label only a few with a, b, c, etc.
4) Finally, identify the author’s concluding idea. [Put brackets around it.]

Writing your Summary

1) First, mention the title of the text and the name of the author.
2) Next, paraphrase the author’s thesis as briefly as possible.
3) Then, briefly paraphrase each key point from the body of the text.
4) Finally, paraphrase the author’s concluding point.

The following summary example is from student Emilia Sanchez’s paper on Betsy Taylor’s “Big Box Stores are Bad for Main Street” (A Writer’s Reference, Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers 71).

Thesis (from Taylor, the original author): The real concern about having a 25-acre slab of concrete with a 100,000 square foot box of stuff land on a town is whether it’s good for a community’s soul.
Summary (from Emilia, the student): In her essay “Big Box Stores are Bad for Main Street,” Betsy Taylor argues that chain stores harm communities by taking the life out of downtown shopping districts.

Main point (from Taylor, the original author): Small businesses are great for a community. They offer more personal service; they won’t threaten to pack up and leave town if they don’t get tax breaks, free roads and other blandishments; and small-business owners are much more responsive to a customer’s needs.

Summary (from Emilia, the student): Taylor argues that small businesses are better than stories like Target because they emphasize personal interactions and don’t place demands on a community’s resources.

Quick tip: Imagine you are writing your summary for a classmate who has not read the text [She has not done her homework – bad student! ] Ask yourself: Will your classmate understand the author’s main ideas? Could s/he restate the ideas to someone else using only YOUR summary?

Analyses

An analysis paper makes an argument about a text. Unlike a summary, your goal is not merely to paraphrase an author’s ideas. Rather, you are making an original argument about a text.

Reading to Analyze

When reading a text to analyze:

1) First, identify the author’s thesis, main points, and concluding point.
2) Next, interact with the text by making comments and asking questions in the margins.
3) Then, reread your annotations (notes) from the text. What do you think about the author’s ideas? What assumptions does the author make? What problems can you find with the author’s argument?

Writing your Analysis

1) First, in an introduction, briefly summarize the author’s main ideas.
2) Then, include a thesis statement that expresses your own judgment about the text.
3) Next, include body paragraphs that support your thesis with evidence from the original text.
4) Finally, include a conclusion that briefly restates your thesis and main points of analysis.
The following is from Emilia (the student’s) analysis paper on Taylor’s text about big-box stores.

By ignoring the complex economic relationship between large chain stores and their communities, Taylor incorrectly assumes that simply getting rid of big-box stores would have a positive effect on America’s communities.

Taylor’s use of colorful language reveals that she has a sentimental view of American society and does not understand economic realities. In her first paragraph, Taylor refers to a big-box store as a “25-acre slab of concrete with a 100,000 square foot box of stuff” that land on a town (1011). But she oversimplifies a complex issue. Taylor does not consider that many downtown business districts failed long before chain stores moved in. Big-box stores can actually provide much-needed jobs.

In her thesis statement, Emilia makes a judgment about the effectiveness of Taylor’s argument which is we should eliminate all big-box stores. In her first body paragraph, Emilia points out that Taylor’s view is “sentimental” and that she “does not understand economic realities.” Emilia provides evidence for her point of analysis when she quotes Taylor directly. The student then offers her own opinion about the value of big-box stores in order to counter a weak point of Taylor’s argument.