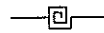


TWO

“HER POINT IS”

The Art of Summarizing



IF IT IS TRUE, as we claim in this book, that to argue persuasively you need to be in dialogue with others, then summarizing others' arguments is central to your arsenal of basic moves. Because writers who make strong claims need to map their claims relative to those of other people, it is important to know how to summarize effectively what those other people say. (We're using the word "summarizing" here to refer to any information from others that you present in your own words, including that which you paraphrase.)

Many writers shy away from summarizing—perhaps because they don't want to take the trouble to go back to the text in question and wrestle with what it says, or because they fear that devoting too much time to other people's ideas will take away from their own. When assigned to write a response to an article, such writers might offer their own views on the article's *topic* while hardly mentioning what the article itself argues or says. At the opposite extreme are those who do nothing *but* summarize. Lacking confidence, perhaps, in their own ideas, these writers so overload their texts with summaries of others' ideas that their own voice gets lost. And since these summaries are not

animated by the writers' own interests, they often read like mere lists of things that X thinks or Y says—with no clear focus.

As a general rule, a good summary requires balancing what the original author is saying with the writer's own focus. Generally speaking, a summary must at once be true to what the original author says while at the same time emphasizing those aspects of what the author says that interest you, the writer. Striking this delicate balance can be tricky, since it means facing two ways at once: both outward (toward the author being summarized) and inward (toward yourself). Ultimately, it means being respectful of others while simultaneously structuring how you summarize them in light of your own text's central claim.

See how Barack Obama summarizes part of the U.S. Constitution in a speech about race, p. 361, ¶4.

ON THE ONE HAND, PUT YOURSELF IN *THEIR* SHOES

To write a really good summary, you must be able to suspend your own beliefs for a time and put yourself in the shoes of someone else. This means playing what the writing theorist Peter Elbow calls the “believing game,” in which you try to inhabit the worldview of those whose conversation you are joining—and whom you are perhaps even disagreeing with—and try to see their argument from their perspective. This ability to temporarily suspend one's own convictions is a hallmark of good actors, who must convincingly “become” characters who in real life they may actually detest. As a writer, when you play the believing game really well, readers should not be able to tell whether you agree or disagree with the ideas you are summarizing.

If, as a writer, you cannot or will not suspend your own beliefs in this way, you are likely to produce summaries that are so

obviously biased that they undermine your credibility with readers. Consider the following summary.

In his article "Don't Blame the Eater," David Zinczenko accuses the fast-food companies of an evil conspiracy to make people fat. I disagree because these companies have to make money.

If you review what Zinczenko actually says (pp. 153–55), you should immediately see that this summary amounts to an unfair distortion. While Zinczenko does argue that the practices of the fast-food industry have the *effect* of making people fat, he never goes so far as to suggest that the fast-food industry conspires to do so with deliberately evil intent.

Another tell-tale sign of this writer's failure to give Zinczenko a fair hearing is the hasty way he abandons the summary after only one sentence and rushes on to his own response. So eager is this writer to disagree that he not only caricatures what Zinczenko says but also gives the article a hasty, superficial reading. Granted, there are many writing situations in which, because of matters of proportion, a one- or two-sentence summary is precisely what you want. Indeed, as writing professor Karen Lunsford (whose own research focuses on argument theory) points out, it is standard in the natural and social sciences to summarize the work of others quickly, in one pithy sentence or phrase, as in the following example.

Several studies (Crackle, 1992; Pop, 2001; Snap, 1987) suggest that these policies are harmless; moreover, other studies (Dick, 2002; Harry, 2003; Tom, 1987) argue that they even have benefits.

But if your assignment is to respond in writing to a single author like Zinczenko, then you will need to tell your readers enough

about his or her argument so they can assess its merits on their own, independent of you.

When a writer fails to play the believing game, he or she often falls prey to what we call “the closest cliché syndrome,” in which what gets summarized is not the view the author in question has actually expressed, but a familiar cliché that the writer *mistakes* for the author’s view (sometimes because the writer believes it and mistakenly assumes the author must too). So, for example, Martin Luther King Jr.’s passionate defense of civil disobedience in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” gets summarized not as the defense of political protest that it actually is, but as a plea for everyone to “just get along.” Similarly, Zinzchenko’s critique of the fast-food industry might get summarized as a call for overweight people to take responsibility for their weight.

Whenever you enter into a conversation with others in your writing, then, it is extremely important that you go back to what those others have said, that you study it very closely, and that you not collapse it to something you already have heard or know. Writers who fail to do this end up essentially conversing with themselves—with imaginary others who are really only the products of their own biases and preconceptions.

ON THE OTHER HAND, KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING

Even as writing an effective summary requires you to temporarily adopt the worldviews of others, it does not mean ignoring your own views altogether. Paradoxically, at the same time that summarizing another text requires you to represent fairly what it says, it also requires that your own response exert a quiet influence. A good summary, in other words, has a focus

or spin that allows the summary to fit with your own overall agenda while still being true to the text you are summarizing.

If you read the essay by David Zinczenko (pp. 153–55), you should be able to see that an essay on the fast-food industry in general will call for a very different summary than will an essay on parenting, corporate regulation, or warning labels. If you want to include all three, fine; but in that case you'll need to subordinate these three issues to one of Zinczenko's general claims and then make sure this general claim directly sets up your own argument.

For example, suppose you want to argue that it is parents, not fast-food companies, who are to blame for children's obesity. To set up this argument, you will probably want to compose a summary that highlights what Zinczenko says about the fast-food industry and parents. Consider this sample.

In his article "Don't Blame the Eater," David Zinczenko argues that today's fast-food chains fill the nutritional void in children's lives left by their overtaxed working parents. With many parents working long hours and unable to supervise what their children eat, Zinczenko claims, children today regularly turn to low-cost, calorie-laden foods that the fast-food chains are all too eager to supply. When he himself was a young boy, for instance, and his single mother was away at work, he ate at Taco Bell, McDonald's, and other chains on a regular basis, and ended up overweight. Zinczenko's hope is that with the new spate of lawsuits against the food industry, other children with working parents will have healthier choices available to them, and that they will not, like him, become obese.

In my view, however, it is the parents, and not the food chains, who are responsible for their children's obesity. While it is true that many of today's parents work long hours, there are still several things that parents can do to guarantee that their children eat healthy foods.

This summary succeeds not only because it provides one big claim under which several of Zinczenko's points neatly fit ("today's fast-food chains fill the nutritional void in children's lives left by their overtaxed working parents"), but also because this big claim points toward the second paragraph: the writer's own thesis about parental responsibility. A less astute, less focused summary would merely include Zinczenko's indictment of the fast-food industry and ignore what he says about parents.

This advice—to summarize each author in terms of the specific issue your own argument focuses on—may seem painfully obvious. But writers who aren't attuned to these issues often summarize a given author on one issue even though their text actually focuses on another. To avoid this problem, you need to make sure that your "they say" and "I say" are well matched. In fact, aligning what they say with what you say is a good thing to work on when revising what you've written.

Often writers who summarize without regard to their own interests fall prey to what might be called "list summaries," summaries that simply inventory the original author's various points but fail to focus those points around any larger overall claim. If you've ever heard a talk in which the points were connected only by words like "and then," "also," and "in addition," you know how such lists can put listeners to sleep—as shown in Figure 3. A typical list summary sounds like this.

The author says many different things about his subject. *First* he says. . . . *Then* he makes the point that. . . . *In addition* he says. . . . *And then* he writes. . . . *Also* he shows that. . . . *And then* he says. . . .

It may be boring list summaries like this that give summaries in general a bad name and even prompt some instructors to discourage their students from summarizing at all.



THE EFFECT OF A TYPICAL LIST SUMMARY

FIGURE 3

In conclusion, writing a good summary means not just representing an author's view accurately, but doing so in a way that fits your own composition's larger agenda. On the one hand, it means playing Peter Elbow's believing game and doing justice to the source; if the summary ignores or misrepresents the source, its bias and unfairness will show. On the other hand, even as it does justice to the source, a summary has to have a slant or spin that prepares the way for your own claims. Once a summary enters your text, you should think of it as joint property—reflecting both the source you are summarizing and you yourself.

SUMMARIZING SATIRICALLY

Thus far in this chapter we have argued that, as a general rule, good summaries require a balance between what someone else

has said and your own interests as a writer. Now, however, we want to address one exception to this rule: the satiric summary, in which a writer deliberately gives his or her own spin to someone else's argument in order to reveal a glaring shortcoming in it. Despite our previous comments that well-crafted summaries generally strike a balance between heeding what someone else has said and your own, independent interests, the satiric mode can at times be a very effective form of critique because it lets the summarized argument condemn itself without overt editorializing by you, the writer. If you've ever watched *The Daily Show*, you'll recall that it basically summarizes silly things political leaders have said or done, letting their words or actions undermine themselves.

Consider another example. In late September 2001, President Bush in a speech to Congress urged the nation's "continued participation and confidence in the American economy" as a means of recovering from the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The journalist Allan Sloan made fun of this proposal simply by summarizing it, observing that the president had equated "patriotism with shopping. Maxing out your credit cards at the mall wasn't self indulgence, it was a way to get back at Osama bin Laden." Sloan's summary leaves no doubt where he stands—he considers Bush's proposal ridiculous, or at least too simple.

USE SIGNAL VERBS THAT FIT THE ACTION

In introducing summaries, try to avoid bland formulas like "he talks about," "she says," or "they believe." Though language like this is sometimes serviceable enough, it often fails to capture accurately what the person has said. In some cases, "he says" may even drain the passion out of the ideas you're summarizing.

We suspect that the habit of ignoring the action in what we summarize stems from the mistaken belief we mentioned earlier that writing is about playing it safe and not making waves, a matter of piling up truths and bits of knowledge rather than a dynamic process of doing things to and with other people. People who wouldn't hesitate to say “X totally misrepresented” something when chatting with friends will in their writing often opt for far tamer and even less accurate phrases like “X said.”

But the authors you summarize at the college level never simply “say” or “discuss” things; they “urge,” “emphasize,” and “insist on” them. David Zinczenko, for example, doesn't just say that fast-food companies contribute to obesity; he *complains* or *protests* that they do; he *challenges*, *chastises*, and *indicts* those companies. The Declaration of Independence doesn't just *talk about* the treatment of the colonies by the British; it *protests against* it. To do justice to the authors you cite, we recommend that when summarizing—or even when introducing a quotation—you use vivid and precise signal verbs as often as possible. Though “he says” or “she believes” will sometimes be the most appropriate language for the occasion, your text will often be more accurate and lively if you tailor your verbs to suit the precise actions you're describing.

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING SUMMARIES AND QUOTATIONS

- ▶ She demonstrates that _____.
- ▶ In fact, they celebrate the fact that _____.
- ▶ _____, he admits.

**VERBS FOR INTRODUCING
SUMMARIES AND QUOTATIONS**

VERBS FOR MAKING A CLAIM

argue	insist
assert	observe
believe	remind us
claim	report
emphasize	suggest

VERBS FOR EXPRESSING AGREEMENT

acknowledge	endorse
admire	extol
agree	praise
celebrate the fact that	reaffirm
corroborate	support
do not deny	verify

VERBS FOR QUESTIONING OR DISAGREEING

complain	disavow
complicate	question
contend	refute
contradict	reject
deny	renounce
deplore the tendency to	repudiate

VERBS FOR MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

advocate	implore
call for	plead
demand	recommend
encourage	urge
exhort	warn

Exercises

1. To get a feel for Peter Elbow's "believing game," write a summary of some belief that you strongly disagree with. Then write a summary of the position that you actually hold on this topic. Give both summaries to a classmate or two, and see if they can tell which position you endorse. If you've succeeded, they won't be able to tell.
2. Write two different summaries of David Zinczenko's "Don't Blame the Eater" (pp. 153–55). Write the first one for an essay arguing that, contrary to what Zinczenko claims, there *are* inexpensive and convenient alternatives to fast-food restaurants. Write the second for an essay that agrees with Zinczenko in blaming fast-food companies for youthful obesity, but questions his view that bringing lawsuits against those companies is a legitimate response to the problem. Compare your two summaries: though they are of the same article, they should look very different.