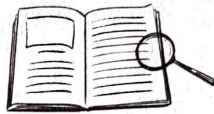


THE WRITER'S PRACTICE



*Building Confidence in
Your Nonfiction Writing*

JOHN WARNER



PENGUIN BOOKS

What Do They Mean?

(Argument Summary and Response)

One of the fundamental skills in making arguments is to be able to accurately convey the arguments of others. In writing teacher circles, we often call this “summary,” but I’ve found that this word can be somewhat misleading. A good summary doesn’t just repeat what someone else said as a kind of regurgitation of content; it distills the original text down to its core meaning.

A good summary zeroes in on the main idea of the text, the author’s point. It captures the forest without describing all the individual trees. When you summarize, it is as though you are standing in the shoes of the original author and are the vessel through which their ideas flow. Now, when you write something that brings a summary of another person’s argument together with your own argument, you may reveal strong disagreements (or agreements, or a mix of both) with this other person’s argument, but while summarizing the other’s argument you’re trying to be as true to the original as possible.

Ideally for the audience, the summary stands in the place of having to read the original text. They can trust you, the summarizer, to accurately convey what this other person was claiming to be true.

For a summary to be effective, it must be shorter, often a good

deal shorter, than the original article; otherwise, why are your summarizing it?

AUDIENCE

The audience is curious about an argument put forward in the article you're summarizing, but they don't have time to read it. They've come to you to find out what the fuss is about. They trust you and won't be immediately checking on the accuracy of your summary, but they will obviously have enough information to do so, if they desire, at some future point.

If they find out you've steered them wrong, you may permanently lose credibility as a source to be trusted.

PROCESS

1. Find an article with an argument.

These are readily available. Every newspaper has an op-ed (opinion and editorial) section. Websites are constantly publishing arguments, which is why we can spend so much time arguing with total strangers on social media. Make sure the article comes from a verifiably credible source, and choose an argument in which you're interested.

2. Read the article.

Read the article once through to get the gist. With practice, you can usually do a mostly accurate summary after a single read-through, but it's a good habit to do one read, then go back and check your understanding.

Are there any parts you kind of get but not entirely? What about vocabulary that you mostly understand in context but are also maybe guessing about a little bit?

Perhaps the article refers to an incident or idea in a way that assumes you're familiar with it, but you aren't. Take some time to fill any gaps in your knowledge, until you feel you have an excellent handle on the article. These days, we have wonderfully handy tools at our fingertips (or thumb tips) to work with.

3. *Draft a summary.*

Keeping your audience and purpose in mind, draft your summary. You'll want to focus on the argument, really distill it to its essence. As you write, you should give the argument to the author, using their name and a verb that conveys the fact that they're the one making the argument, such as: "Warner believes writing an accurate summary is a 'fundamental' skill for writing arguments."

Notice the difference between that sentence and something like this: "Warner wrote about how summaries are used in arguments."

The second example doesn't share any claim I (Warner) made. It describes content rather than summarizes argument. Verbs like "believes," "claims," "argues," even "says" (provided it's followed by a claim) help make sure you're focusing on the original author's argument.

Once you've identified the main idea, think about your audience. After hearing the central claim, they're likely to be thinking, "Why? Why does this person believe this thing I'm being told?"

Use the remainder of the summary to tell them why the original author believes what they believe. You will be supporting that initial claim about the main argument with a series of other claims. It's like those Russian nesting dolls. You start with the big doll by making a claim, open it up, and then each doll is another claim that supports the one before it.

4. *Test the summary.*

Find someone who has not read the article you're summarizing and have them read your summary.

When they're done, without letting them refer to your summary, see if they can accurately summarize your summary.

Next, have them read the original article. Have them write a one-sentence summary of the main point after reading the article. Does it match up with what they got from your summary?

If something is off, discuss it with your tester. What meaning are they getting that you're missing? It's possible they're off base and you're on target. Hash it out until you're satisfied that you've accurately captured the original.

5. *Revise, edit, and title.*

A summary rarely stands by itself, but it's worth taking the time to address any of your reader's questions or concerns.



REFLECT

This is going to sound odd, but I believe reading is one of our most difficult skills. It sounds odd because everyone we're talking about here knows how to read, but it is very hard to read well, and there are a lot of forces working against allowing us to read for deep understanding and engagement.

When a reading is forced on you, sometimes it can feel overwhelming, making skimming highly tempting. Sometimes the reading seems initially dull or uninteresting, either dividing our attention or leading to the old "I ran my eyes over the words, but I don't remember a thing" scenario.

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Often we're incentivized to read quickly, gleaning the gist because the gist might be enough to figure out a question on a multiple-choice exam or convince someone we laid eyes on the document, but in the process we often miss something. When writing a summary, this can turn into a game of telephone, where a message is passed around the circle. As the original message moves from person to person, each person misses a little bit in turn, and the meaning ultimately becomes distorted in large, not small, ways.

I know I experience this in my own writing, but it's true when I read student work as well. I'm so conditioned to look for mistakes that I start to see flaws where they aren't present, or I may overlook virtues because I'm too busy focusing on other things.

Reading deliberately, checking my understanding, and not settling for the gist has become a really important skill for me. I don't always employ it, and it's not always necessary, but I know when I need it, it's there.

After this experience, maybe try practicing being more deliberate in your reading. When the reading is important, I think you'll find it actually saves time. When you need to make use of what you've been reading, you'll have a much better handle on what you've read.

REMIX

Once you've crafted a good summary, it's time to respond with an argument of your own.

Do you agree or disagree with the original author's opinion? Or is it some mix of the two? On the one hand, I believe X, but on the other hand, I believe Y.

A response to an original summary seeks to extend the argument by adding to it. This is not just a chance to say someone else is wrong (or right). It's a chance to extend the conversation.

The best way to think of it is to go back to your audience. Think of them as an interested third party who is trying their best to understand the issue being argued over. Your response is meant to enhance their understanding.

Make sure you start your response by declaring where you stand (agree, disagree, or a bit of both), followed by answering the likely next question, "Why?"

Focus on satisfying the audience's curiosity over this issue while also trying to be the most persuasive voice in the chain of argument. This means not only being clear with your own claims but offering evidence and argument in support of those claims.

Huh? Say What?

(Research Translation)

Just about every day in the news you'll hear or read something like "Based in research coming out of [very important and impressive sounding place] . . ." Because a news reader or news publication is presenting this research that has come from this impressive place, we're inclined to trust it, but should we?

I find academic research intimidating to read, even having been exposed to it for more than twenty years. And yet when I see reporting on research I'm familiar with, I often find mistakes, over-generalizations, misinterpretations, exaggerations. It's frustrating when I know something is off. It also makes me wonder if something is off more often than I know when I hear about research in areas I'm not familiar with.

Academic research may embrace jargon that seems obscure to the layperson. The procedures make my head spin, and the statistical findings, with their confidence intervals and standard deviations, are equally confounding.

It's important to remember that academic research is written for specific audiences and with specific purposes in mind. All the stuff that seems confusing to a layperson helps other academics judge the underlying rigor with which the authors approached their

research. Using jargon or terminology that seems obscure to me but is common in the specific field signals belonging to that field—that the author(s) is a member of the particular tribe for whom this research is conducted and is of interest.

This doesn't necessarily make academic research elitist or exclusive. If you sat down in the office of a coaching staff for a professional sport, you'd be equally subject to jargon or terms that seem foreign and confusing. It's a way for people within a culture to speak to one another.

There are some writers who specialize in "popularizing" academic research. Malcolm Gladwell, a writer for the *New Yorker*, is perhaps the most well known, though many academics are critical of the way he sometimes ignores the complexities of the research he popularizes.

But the vast majority of published research never breaks out of the academic world. This experience is designed to achieve two things: (1) get you working with academic research in order to up your comfort level with texts that are often complex and foreign, and (2) do a favor for the academics who publish their research by "translating" their findings for a more general audience.

This will also be an excellent challenge to your reading skills, since it may initially feel like diving into a foreign language.

AUDIENCE

Your audience consists of regular people who are curious and like to learn new things about the world but probably don't make a regular habit of perusing publications such as the *Journal of Supply Chain Management* or the *Journal of Biosensors and Bioelectronics* or the *Journal for Maritime Research* or the *Journal of Literary Semantics*. (All of these exist for real.)

They want to know what the researchers have found in their

research, but they don't want to do the hard work of reading and interpreting the academic research for themselves.

Your goal is to wow them by telling them something cool they didn't already know. It need not be life changing or earth shattering, but you're aiming for something they might want to pass along to someone else, like that trees and plants can apparently communicate with each other through a network of underground fungi, as found in the research of Suzanne Simard of the University of British Columbia.

That's cool, right?

You'll want to provide a sufficient translation of the original academic research to give your audience enough information to pass on the cool idea to someone else.

PROCESS

1. *Choose the journal and article.*

You can easily find lists of academic journals online at Wikipedia and elsewhere. If you have access to an academic library, you will find the available resources through the library's online interfaces for journals.

My recommendation is to start with a subject area of interest and then look for journals under that subject. When you find an interesting-looking journal, start browsing individual articles. The article abstracts should give a good indication as to whether a more thorough look at the entire article is warranted. You only need one article, and as long as there's an interesting takeaway in the findings it'll work for our purposes.

2. *Digest the article.*

Notice I did not say "read" your article. Sure, you'll read it, but this kind of text often requires a process that focuses on what you need

to meet your objective, rather than digging into every last morsel of information. Remember your purpose and audience. You'll want to read the whole article, but there will be much information that will be largely irrelevant to your goals. For example, the specifics of a research sample are important for researchers who may want to try to replicate the research, but you may just need to know that the sample was random or a sample of convenience. You're more interested in why this sample was used than in the particular nitty-gritty.

For the most part, you'll want to concentrate on the findings and implications (sometimes also called "discussion"), which is where the results of the research and why the research is important is shared. Make sure you have a deep understanding of this material. This may require additional reading in sources other than the article. If there is a term or idea you don't understand, seek outside resources that will help you understand it.

This is what is meant by "digesting" the article. You're not going to be able to bluff your understanding.

3. *Translate the article.*

Keeping your focus on your audience's needs, attitudes, and knowledge, tell them what's up with the research. Think about how to hook their interest and then satisfy their questions and curiosity once their interest is hooked.

For example, if I said, "Did you know that trees can talk to each other?" you'd say something like, "Whatchoo talking about?" My next sentence would add depth and clarity to my initial statement. Once I'm done with that, my audience likely has another question they want answered, maybe something like, "Who would study such a thing?" or "Why should I believe you?," in which case I'd likely go deeper into who conducted the research, how it was conducted, and why forestry scientists are interested in researching these questions.

4. *Test your translation.*

Find an audience and have them read your translation. Ask them to rate their interest in repeating your message to someone else on a scale of one to ten where one means, "I'd like to actively forget I even read this thing," and ten means, "I have to go find a tall building and a megaphone so I can shout this fascinating information to the world."

After that, ask them to repeat what they believe they've learned. If they're going to be broadcasting the message to the world, you want to make sure the message is accurate.

5. *Revise, edit, polish, title.*

Utilizing your audience feedback, as well as your own reflections on your draft and how well it engages your audience and purpose, revise your translation accordingly.

A title that captures the most interesting nugget of the research will help hook the audience.



REFLECT

How long did it take you to digest the article? Do you feel more confident in your ability to interact with this kind of specialized research and writing? If so, what technique or skill you employed will be most useful going forward?

If not, what do you think you need to work on in the future to increase your confidence?