

Bright Ideas

The differences between a summary and a critique

While summaries and critiques are relatively easy to write, sometimes it's difficult to tell the differences between one and the other. It's not uncommon for writers to lapse or fall into summarizing (retelling literature's main points in their own words) when the objective is to actually write a critical response (evaluating or assessing literature to share their perspective with their reader). While a brief summary is a part of any well-written critique, the major focus of a critical response is offering an analysis of what you read. In contrast, a summary simply shortens and restates what you read. To make clear the differences between these two critical components of college writing, you should consider what each type of writing should or should not do.

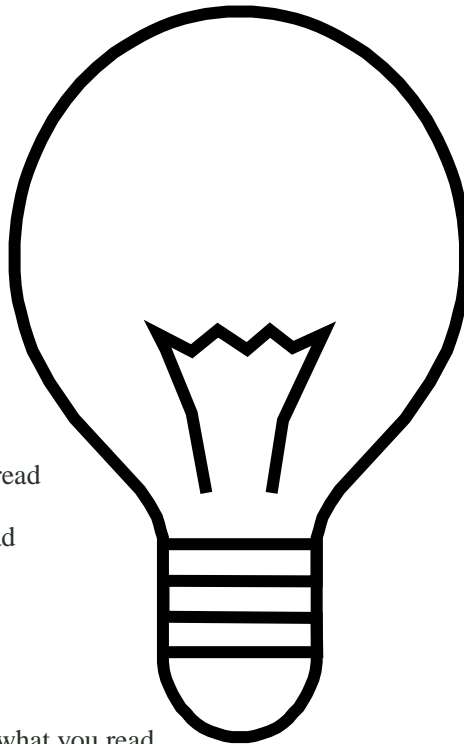


A summary does not-

- *misrepresent what you read
- *use irrelevant or unnecessary details
- *analyze or interpret what you read
- *judge or evaluate what you read

A critique does not -

- *restate what you read
- *cover only the main points of what you read
- *repeat unimportant or irrelevant details
- *have a hostile or overly biased tone or style
- *use slang or overly casual language



A summary does -

- *restate what you read in your own words
- *present only the main, or important, details
- *maintain a neutral and objective stance

A critique does -

- *move beyond summary
- *assess or analyze what you read
- *offer interpretations and judgments about what you read
- *give evidence to support your evaluation

Both the summary and the critique should be written using the literary present tense: *the author writes* and third person point of view: *he remembers, she points out, the essay (it) has ...* Both kinds of writing should include the title of the piece you're writing about and author's full name. Subsequent mention of the author should be by last name, never first name only. Both kinds of writing should be carefully proofread and formatted in MLA style or according to your teacher's instructions.

Writing a Critique (Critical Analysis)

Writing a **critique** moves beyond summarizing toward evaluating what you read. By applying *critical thinking* to what you read, you'll be able to not only *organize* ideas into understandable patterns, but also *develop relationships between the ideas of a text and your own experiences and opinions*. Although the skill of summarizing serves as a first step in writing an effective critique, **the essential part of a critique occurs when you move from understanding what the author's purpose is toward evaluating or assessing how effectively he or she fulfills that purpose**. When you try to understand what the author of a text is attempting to say or prove, you move toward a *synthesis* (your own perspective) of how and why the text is effective or not. By performing this *analysis* (understanding how the parts of a text work together to fulfill purpose), you can demonstrate to your reader how the author of a text has, or has not, successfully conveyed a message. While **critiques** may vary in length, most often they are written in an essay format in which you use organized and controlled paragraphs to *articulate* for your reader what you think and feel about the text you read. Most **critiques** contain the following elements:

- Use of literary present tense
- A brief summary of the essay to be **critiqued**, including title and author's name
- A thesis, or evaluative statement, that indicates the overall assessment of the text
- Supporting evidence and central points relevant to the evaluation (usually including material from the text)
- A conclusion that reinforces the context in which the assessment is presented and leaves readers thinking about the text in terms of the evaluation provided

Since the purpose of a critique is to present a well-organized flow of your ideas regarding a text, it is important to make judgments about how a text works and consider ways of linking about the author's message or purpose. Therefore, you should offer interpretations and elaborate on ideas to present what you think and feel about what you read. Try using the following techniques:

- *Read*, and re-read, the text carefully
- *Write* while reading and make critical notes and comments about the text
- *Identify* the author's thesis or main purpose
- *Determine judgments* about the text; *think* about what you want to say
- *Organize* your thoughts into an outline of your point of view about the text

Once you've made an outline, you are ready to write the critique. Begin your introduction with a very brief summary (one or two sentences) in which you present the author's thesis or main point, including the author's name, title of the text. Try to inform your readers about what the text is about. End your introduction with your thesis: a statement regarding your *interpretation* and *assessment* of the text. Next, *present the network of ideas* that contribute to and support your *judgment* of the text. After you've written a draft of your critique, *check it for accuracy and completeness*. Remember that quotes from the text can help support or frame your *analysis*. *Revise* the critique for style and a smooth, logical flow. When needed, use transitional words and phrases for coherence. *Proofread* for grammatical correctness, punctuation, and spelling.

Additional Sources:

"Reading Essays." The New Millennium Reader. 3rd Ed. pp. 1-20

"Reading Critically." The New Century Handbook. 2nd Ed. 2a, 2b, pp. 18-30 , 3rd Ed. 2a, 2b, pp. 18-30

"Building a Compelling Case." The New Century Handbook. 2nd Ed. 7f, pp.142-148, 3rdEd. pp. 157-159

"Writing Interpretively about Literature." The New Century Handbook. 2nd Ed. 14a, pp. 349-354 , 3rd Ed. 17b, pp. 404-410