



**HELLENIC REPUBLIC**  
**UNIVERSITY OF CRETE**

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## **Academic English**

**Section:** Summary Writing Methods

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## SUMMARY WRITING METHODS

There are two ways to go about preparing a summary. Which method you choose usually depends on the length and nature of the original passage. For shorter passages, determining and listing the main ideas and then writing the summary may be the way to go. However, for longer passages, underlining and additional editing may be needed to ensure you are including the author's main ideas. Below are commentary and examples for both of methods.

### Method One: Underlying main ideas. Starting at a paragraph level.

What main ideas comprise the essential message?

#### *PART ONE*

**Point 1: An English paragraph is a group of related sentences on one subject.** Sentences are related to each other so that the paragraph contains clear thoughts about one subject and only one subject. For example, if you are writing about solar power, all your sentences would relate to the sun as a source of energy.

**Point 2: The most important or main idea is expressed in the topic sentence.** In other words, the topic sentence contains the most significant or broadest concept, question or statement so that it unifies and covers all the other ideas in the paragraph. If your main idea is that solar energy is a good way to power cars, then your topic sentence might introduce the topic by asking a question: "Why do solar-powered cars make sense?" Or it might introduce the topic with a statement: "There are several reasons why solar-powered cars make sense." All the other sentences in the paragraph will support this main idea, explaining why solar-powered cars are beneficial.

**Point 3: Most often the topic sentence will be at the beginning to introduce the main idea; or sometimes it can be at the end to summarize the main idea.**

Topic sentence .....

Supporting sentences (facts, examples, comparisons, etc.) **Or**

Supporting sentences.....

Topic sentence.....

#### **Read the following:**

- (1) The chemical components, of acid rain are changing the natural environment. (2) Acid rain is the result of increased emissions of sulfur dioxide from burning coal and nitrogen oxide from car exhaust. (3) Although sulfur and nitrogen are sources of food for trees, grasses and other vegetation, when sulfur and nitrogen combine in the form of acid rain, these elements damage green leaf cells and impair the growth of plant life.

The general subject of this paragraph is acid rain. The topic sentence in this paragraph is the first sentence. It expresses the idea that the elements that make up acid rain hurt the environment. Sentences 2 and 3 directly support this idea. Based on the information in the first sentence, we expect the rest of the paragraph to discuss the chemistry of acid rain and the way it damages the environment. Therefore, the second sentence gives us information about the elements found in acid rain. The third sentence tells us how these elements affect plants.

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**Exercise 1: Read the following paragraphs. What is the general subject? Which is the topic sentence? Do all the other sentences relate to the topic?**

**Paragraph A**

(1) Of the many types of energy, one major category is kinetic energy or the energy of motion. (2) An example of energy in motion is when a bat hits a baseball. (3) The bat exerts a kinetic force that causes the ball to fly in the air. (4) Mechanical energy is a type of kinetic energy applied to objects. (5) Thermal energy is the energy of molecules in motion. (6) More and more students are doing research on energy these days.

**What is the general subject?**

**Which number is the topic sentence?**

**Do all sentences relate to the topic? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If no, which number(s)?**

**Paragraph B**

(1) Medical scientists are finding a significant difference in how men and women develop heart problems. (2) Statistics show that women on average develop heart disease later in life than men. (3) One theory is that younger women who give birth to children develop wider coronary arteries, and this helps women to avoid heart attacks as they get older. (4) Most men do not believe this, however.

*What is the subject? \_\_\_\_\_*

*Which number is the topic sentence? \_\_\_\_\_*

*Do all sentences relate to the topic? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If no, which number(s)? \_\_\_\_\_*

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**Read the following if you need some help with Exercise 1:** In Paragraph A, above, the general subject is energy. Sentence 1 contains the main idea that kinetic energy is a major category of energy. The last sentence (number 6), which deals with students, does not directly relate to the topic. In Paragraph B the first sentence introduces the topic, the significant difference in the way men and women develop heart disease. Sentence 4, which discusses what men believe, is off the topic.

## Exercise 2

*The following paragraph about solar-powered cars is incomplete.*

*Read the paragraph and consider what might be a good topic sentence to unify all the ideas.*

Solar-powered cars are very expensive because of the high development cost of solar batteries. In addition, the cells of the solar batteries can store only limited amounts of energy. So solar cars are not practical for driving on long trips. The biggest problem is the constant need to recharge the cells. This is especially difficult when one drives on cloudy days and at nighttime.

**Choose one of the following as the topic sentence.**

- \_\_\_(1) Solar-powered cars are expensive.
- \_\_\_(2) There are many advantages and disadvantages to solar energy.
- \_\_\_(3) The future practicality of solar cars depends on overcoming problems with solar batteries.
- \_\_\_(4) Solar batteries are the key to understanding how solar energy can be used to drive cars.

## Exercise 3

**Read the following paragraph about the solar system and think about a topic sentence that would connect all the ideas.**

Mercury is the hottest planet in the solar system because it is nearest the sun. Mercury's surface is totally dry and it is so hot that there is no atmosphere. Venus is the second closest planet to the sun. The hot atmosphere of Venus is similar to that of Earth, but because Venus is so near the sun there are no bodies of water on its surface. Earth, the third closest planet to the sun, has a cooler atmosphere that sustains animals, plants and several bodies of water on its surface.

**Choose one of the following as the topic sentence.**

- \_\_\_ (1) The three planets closest to the sun are Mercury, Venus and Earth.
- \_\_\_ (2) Surface and atmospheric conditions vary widely among the three planets nearest the sun.
- \_\_\_ (3) The closer a planet is to the sun, the hotter it is.
- \_\_\_ (4) The surface and atmosphere of Earth are different from those of Mars and Venus.

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## Exercise 4

*Read the following paragraphs and write your own topic sentence. Make sure that your sentence 1) covers the ideas in the paragraph and 2) relates only to the ideas in the paragraph.*

**A. Write a topic sentence that introduces the idea of birds and feathers.**

*(HINT: It could be a question.)*

Feathers provide good insulation for birds. They can be hard or soft depending on weather conditions and water temperature. For example, some ducks have a thick layer of soft feathers called "down" that protects these birds from extremely cold air and icy water.

**B. Write a topic sentence summarizing this paragraph about tropical rain forests.**

Tropical rain forests are found in 70 different countries worldwide, including Brazil in South America, Indonesia in the South Pacific and Zaire in Africa. Plants that grow in these forests provide us with chocolate, fruit, coffee, rubber and wood. Recently, medical products have been developed from rain forest plants; these include medicines for high blood pressure and cancer.

*Retrieved from: <http://www.fauxpress.com/kimball/w/1.html>*

## **Summarizing exercises : Method 2: Outlining and Editing**

**Read the entire original.** When summarizing another's work, read the whole thing before writing a word. Get a complete picture in order to understand the original before summarizing it.

**Reread and underline.** Reread the original and underline significant points.

**Edit the underlined data.** Condense the underlined info into key words and phrases that can later be put into sentences. Delete extra words and any background information not essential to the main ideas.

**Rewrite and Edit.** Include all-important data in the first draft, even if it's too long because you can trim it later. When you have everything readers need, edit for conciseness.

- ◆ Cross out all needless words without harming clarity or grammar. Use complete sentences.
- ◆ Cross out needless prefaces.
- ◆ Combine related ideas in order to order emphasize relationships (hint: use transitions).

**Document your source.** Make sure to include a works cited page for the original article.

## MORE SUMMARIZING EXERCISES

### I. Read each of these two paragraphs and list the significant ideas comprising each essential message. Write a summary for each paragraph.

A. In recent years, ski-binding manufacturers, in line with consumer demand, have redesigned their bindings several times in an effort to achieve a noncompromising synthesis between performance and safety. Such a synthesis depends on what appear to be divergent goals. Performance, in essence, is a function of the binding's ability to hold the boot firmly to the ski, thus enabling the skier to change rapidly the position of his or her skis without being hampered by a loose or wobbling connection. Safety, on the other hand, is a function of the binding's ability both to release the boot when the skier falls, and to retain the boot when subjected to the normal shocks of skiing. If achieved, this synthesis of performance and safety will greatly increase skiing pleasure while decreasing accidents.

B. Contrary to public belief, sewage-treatment plants do not fully purify sewage. The product that leaves the plant to be dumped into the leaching (sievelike drainage) fields is secondary sewage containing toxic contaminants such as phosphates, nitrates, chloride, and heavy metals. As the secondary sewage filters into the ground, this conglomeration is carried along. Under the leaching area develops a contaminated mound through which groundwater flows, spreading the waste products over great distances. If this leachate reaches the outer limits of a well's drawing radius, the water supply becomes polluted. And because all water flows essentially toward the sea, more pollution is added to the coastal regions by this secondary sewage.

## How do I know if I'm summarizing?

As you read through your essay, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I stating something that would be obvious to a reader or viewer?
- Does my essay move through the plot, history, or author's argument in chronological order, or in the exact same order the author used?
- Am I simply describing what happens, where it happens, or who it happens to?

A "yes" to any of these questions may be a sign that you are summarizing. If you answer yes to the questions below, though, it is a sign that your paper may have more analysis (which is usually a good thing):

- Am I making an original argument about the text?
- Have I arranged my evidence around my own points, rather than just following the author's or plot's order?
- Am I explaining why or how an aspect of the text is significant?

Certain phrases are warning signs of summary. Keep an eye out for these:

*"[This article] is about..."*

*"[This author] writes about..."*

Here's an example of an introductory paragraph containing unnecessary summary. Sentences that summarize are in italics:

*The Great Gatsby is the story of a mysterious millionaire, Jay Gatsby, who lives alone on an island in New York. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the book, but the narrator is Nick Carraway. Nick is Gatsby's neighbor, and he chronicles the story of Gatsby and his circle of friends, beginning with his introduction to the strange man and ending with Gatsby's tragic death.* In the story, Nick describes his environment through various colors, including green, white, and grey. Whereas white and grey symbolize false purity and decay respectively, the color green offers a symbol of hope.

Here's how you might change the paragraph to make it a more effective introduction: In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald provides readers with detailed descriptions of the area surrounding East Egg, New York. In fact, Nick Carraway's narration describes the setting with as much detail as the characters in the book. Nick's description of his environment presents the book's themes, symbolizing significant aspects of the post-World War I era. Whereas white and grey symbolize the false purity and decay of the 1920s, the color green offers a symbol of hope.

This version of the paragraph mentions the book's title, author, setting, and narrator so that the reader is reminded of the text. And that sounds a lot like summary-but the paragraph quickly moves on to the writer's own main topic: the setting and its relationship to the main themes of the book. The paragraph then closes with the writer's specific thesis about the symbolism of white, grey, and green.

Retrieved from : <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/summary.html>

## Notes

### Reference Note

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