Writing Summaries of Nonfiction

Writing a summary is one of the simplest forms of writing. But, that doesn’t mean that it is necessarily easy. In order to write an informative and accurate summary you must first learn to read closely and critically. Close reading means paying attention to every word and highlighting important parts. Critical reading means asking yourself why the author has made these points in this way, what they mean, and whether you agree. Critical reading requires an active reader who doesn’t just passively look at the words.

Four Basics of Critical Reading

1. Preview the essay, article, or chapter
2. Find the main point and the supports
3. Take notes on paper or in the text
4. Review and respond to what you have read

1. Preview the Reading
   Before carefully reading any piece of writing, skim or preview the whole thing. This can usually be done quickly, before reading the piece for meaning. Read the title, headers and introductory paragraph. These will all tell you what the important subjects of the text are. Also note any boldface terms. These are key words or concepts that are important to the topic. As a final step in your preview, ask yourself a guiding question—a question you think the reading might answer. As you begin your close reading try to answer that question.

2. Find the Main Point and Supports
   The main point is the central idea the author wants to communicate. Writers usually introduce their main point early, so read the first few paragraphs with special care. Underline or copy down what you think is the main point, which is usually stated in one or two sentences by the writer. The supports consist of explanation or evidence in a piece of writing. The supports back up the writer’s main point.

3. Take Notes
   Another way to read actively and critically is to take notes. This will help you understand a reading and keep you alert. Use highlighting, underlining or copy out on a notepad or note cards. You especially want to write out the main point and the supports.

4. Review and Respond
   Now you are ready to write the summary (or answer any question regarding the reading). You may want to skim over the text once again, and then...
Writing Summaries

1. First Draft
Using your notes, write a first draft that is one third or less than the length of the original article. Don’t quote! Use your own words; this is called **paraphrasing**, but follow the organization of the ideas in the original article. Your essay should take the following form:

**Introduction**
- Start with a summary or overview of the article which includes the author’s name and the title of the article.
- Finish with a thesis statement that states the main idea of the article.

**Body Paragraphs**
- The number of paragraphs in your summary depends on the length of the original article.
- Your summary should be about one third the length of the original article.
- Start each body paragraph with a topic sentence.
- Each paragraph focuses on a separate main idea and just the most important details from the article.
- Put the ideas from the essay into your own words. Avoid copying phrases and sentences from the article.
- Use transitional words and phrases to connect ideas.

**Concluding Paragraph**
- Summarize the main idea and the underlying meaning of the article.

2. Revise Your Summary
You can almost always improve upon what you wrote in a first draft. Ask yourself the following questions:

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- Did I only include the main points of the article?
- Is my summary written in my words and not in the words of the article’s author?
- Does the organization of my summary follow the organization of the article?
- Is the summary one-third or less the length of the original?
- Did I use proper punctuation, grammar and spelling?
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3. Final Copy
Copy out your final draft of the summary in your best handwriting – or type it out. Every word needs to be legible!
Assignment
Read the following article (“An Introduction to Sherlock Holmes”), annotate and takes notes, and then write a summary of the article. You may not quote. You must paraphrase – that is, put it in your own words. Minimum 400 words.

An Introduction to Sherlock Holmes

The Sherlock Holmes books, created by Arthur Conan Doyle, are some of the greatest mystery novels ever written. Edgar Allen Poe may have invented the detective story, but it was Arthur Conan Doyle who perfected it when he created the character of Sherlock Holmes. The typical detective story begins with a protagonist who is faced with a mostly mundane incident or the report of an incident that he begins to investigate. If we were not so accustomed to mystery novels and what makes them tick this might seem like an unimaginative way to begin a story.

What makes a good detective story work is the technique of the story within a story. As the protagonist begins to investigate the original mystery of a book he comes to reveal a second story contained inside the first one that expands the book and causes it to be transformed.

Detective stories usually begin with a standard set of characters who fall into familiar categories, such as the hard-boiled private eye or the detached scientific investigator. As these characters that the reader is already accustomed to begin to encounter the original mystery of a book, however, they circle around something very different than themselves. Like characters traveling down a maze they reveal new patterns that allow the book to be transformed as they go deeper and deeper.

Arthur Conan Doyle was a master at creating plots that fit inside one another in a logical way. What makes a Sherlock Holmes book so compelling is the way that Doyle masterfully puts one story neatly on top of another like the gears of a clock. The machinery of a Sherlock Holmes book moves slowly as a wider world is uncovered. The more of a Sherlock Holmes book that you read the more that it changes its shape. Arthur Conan Doyle created this way of telling a detective story and then showed how it could be mastered.

Sherlock Holmes is a cipher himself. The reader knows from hints here and there that Holmes has much about him that must be complex and unusual underneath. Exactly what this is, however, is left up to the reader to guess. Is Holmes really as detached as he sometimes seems? What motivates him? What does he care about? Why does he do what he does?

The narrator of a Sherlock Holmes story is always his good friend John Watson. Watson clearly worships Holmes and sees him as a genius. The reader is left to guess how reliable Watson is as a narrator, however, and how much they can always trust what he says. The relationship between Holmes and Watson is a question mark. Holmes often criticizes Watson and acts coldly towards him but then at other moments seems to betray his affection.

The questions that the reader has about both Holmes and Watson are a good place to start a book but they are also questions that a reader can easily entertain without being distracted from the plots that follow. The stories and mysteries in a Sherlock Holmes book almost always end up
being portraits of a larger Victorian society. The story may begin at 221 Baker Street, but in the course of unraveling a case Holmes and Watson are liable to take the reader to the farthest corners of the British empire.

London at the time of the Sherlock Holmes books was still the center of the largest empire that the world had ever seen. The plots reflect this, with characters haunted by their pasts coming to see Holmes and Watson to tell them about what they saw and did in India and Africa and other far off places of the globe.

The motivation for most of the crime committed in a Sherlock Holmes story is revealed to be the result of a conflict between the desire to maintain Victorian social respectability and attain worldly success. The new opportunities offered by industrialization and capitalism often clashed with the more conservative morality that Victorians clung to as a defense against social turmoil. Sherlock Holmes books usually stood somewhere near the center of this conflict, as Doyle attempted to explore the different social crosscurrents of the time with his stories within his stories.

Sherlock Holmes himself brings together many different contradictory threads of Victorian life. His cold demeanor and use of logic represented for many people at the time both what disturbed them about science and also what fascinated them. Sherlock Holmes is an upholder of Victorian morality, as he seeks to put right what has been done wrong and prevent the guilty from disturbing the social order. Sherlock Holmes also stands outside of the social order by keeping many bohemian habits and having many eccentric ways of living his life.

Arthur Conan Doyle began to write about Sherlock Holmes as a way to supplement his income when he was a young doctor struggling to make ends meet. The first Sherlock Holmes story, A Study in Scarlet, was written for Beeton’s Christmas Annual in 1887. This story was also the first use by Doyle of a story within a story, which helps to explain its immediate popularity.

The story starts with John Watson as a recent veteran of the British war in Afghanistan. Watson moves in with Sherlock Holmes as a way of saving money on rent. It is only after he moves in with Holmes that Watson discovers he is also a detective. In the course of following him as he attempts to discover the perpetrator of a series of strange murders Watson reveals to the reader for the first time the strangeness of the character of Sherlock Holmes.

The story starts in London as Watson follows Holmes as he investigates his leads but by the end of the first part the story has been suddenly transformed. After Holmes and Watson apprehend who they think is the murderer he begins to make a long account of who he is and why he has done what he’s done. Very suddenly the action of the story shifts to America and the frontier of Utah as the rest of the book is taken up with his account.

This sudden change of scene is what makes the rest of the story work. Conan Doyle had discovered a new way of telling a story that he would use many times again. The popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories made Arthur Conan Doyle a very wealthy man and gave him the time to pursue his many other interests and become a notable figure of his time. Despite this, Doyle often became tired of writing about Sherlock Holmes.
The fact that he had originally created him as a way of making money perhaps made Doyle think less of Sherlock Holmes than he should have. Whenever Doyle found that he was running low on funds he would write another series of Sherlock Holmes stories that were immediately gobbled up by a hungry public. Arthur Conan Doyle famously tried to kill Sherlock Holmes by having him die together with his nemesis professor Moriarty in the story the Final Problem. Fortunately, he found that he was unable to make this stick, as the public demand for more stories was just too high for him to turn it away for long.

In addition to his Sherlock Holmes stories Arthur Conan Doyle wrote many works of fiction and non-fiction and several theatrical works. All of these were well received and he was considered an important social critic and campaigner for various political causes. Nothing, however, could overshadow the work that he did writing his Sherlock Holmes stories. In the end, it is also through these stories that he has been best remembered.

By creating Sherlock Holmes Arthur Conan Doyle created a permanent place for himself in the world’s literature. He also created a new way of telling a story that has been the basis of countless works by other authors since. It's rare that any author has made a similar impact in any form of literature. By reading any of the Sherlock Holmes stories you will not only be enjoying a series of tales told well but also exploring a part of the foundation of modern literature.