

Summarising text



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Introduction

In this course you will practise writing a summary. Summarising is part of writing assignments. Sometimes in an assignment you are specifically asked to write a summary of something you have read. However, you will need to summarise your reading in most assignments whether you are asked to or not.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course L185 [English for academic purposes online](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand what a summary is: 'the 5Rs'
- recognise a successful summary
- practise turning notes into a summary.

1 Activity 1

The following activity uses the text *Aid agencies and the HIV/AIDS crisis*, linked below. Take a moment to read it now.

[View document.](#)

Activity 1 What is a summary?

A summary can be a few words or many pages long. One of the main reasons for summarising is to give a reader your understanding of what you have read. Here you think about what a summary is.

Summarising is an active process. Which of the following actions are involved?

When you summarise, you should:

- Make the summary shorter than the original.
You **reduce** the length.
- Miss out some of the points made in the original text.
You **reject** information in the original: you include key points but reject some of the detail.
- Write in your own words.
You **reword** to show that you have understood, and to avoid plagiarism.
- Express the original writer's facts and opinions accurately.
You **reproduce** the original writer's facts and opinions.
- Give an opinion about the original writer's views.
If you give your own opinion, you are no longer summarising. You may go on to give your opinion but, first, you must reproduce the original information accurately.
- Compress the same meaning into fewer words.
You **repackage** the information into a lower number of words.

2 Activity 2

Activity 2 The 5Rs of summarising: Reduce, Reject, Reword, Reproduce, Repackage

Read the following example summary which uses all of the 5Rs. Then look at each of the four summaries below and select which of the 5Rs you can see in them.

Original text: Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also tackle health issues around the world, for example the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which often step in following earthquakes and other disasters.

Summary: The involvement of NGOs in health problems

The 5Rs

Reduce: the summary is shorter.

Reject: it misses out the example.

Reword: it uses *problems* instead of *issues*.

Reproduce: it is accurate.

Repackage: it compresses *Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tackle health issues* into *The involvement of NGOs in health problems*.

Question 1

As an international government, the UN is **involved** in many different areas.

Summary: Involvement of UN in many different areas.

- reduce
- reject
- reword
- reproduce
- repackage

Answer

Reduce, reject, reproduce, repackage.

Question 2

In 2001, UNAIDS **launched** the '3 by 5' initiative with the goal of providing anti-retroviral drugs to 3 million people with HIV/AIDS living in developing countries by 2005.

Summary: Launch of '3 by 5' initiative

- reduce
- reject

- reword
- reproduce
- repackage

Answer

Reduce, reject, reproduce, repackage.

Question 3

It emphasises the need to get anti-retroviral drugs to people in Africa, Asia and other poorer parts of the world.

Summary: Emphasis on need to deliver anti-retroviral drugs to poorer parts of world

- reduce
- reject
- reword
- reproduce
- repackage

Answer

Reduce, reject, reproduce, repackage.

Question 4

For the '3 by 5' initiative to succeed, UNAIDS **needs** support from governments around the world and from NGOs like Oxfam and the Red Cross and Red Crescent. It also needs the support of big business, including the big pharmaceutical companies – big pharma.

Summary: Need for support from governments, NGOs and big business

- reduce
- reject
- reword
- reproduce
- repackage

Answer

Reduce, reject, reproduce, repackage.

Comment

None of the four summaries **reword** the original text enough yet. However, they do use the other four Rs. Too little rewording in a longer summary is regarded as **plagiarism**.

3 Activity 3

When you write a longer summary, you still need to use the 5Rs. However, because the summary is longer, you also need summary organisation. Academic texts are usually very organised. When you write a summary, you have to decide whether your summary will have the same organisation as the original text or not. This depends on your purpose.

Activity 3 Writing a longer summary

Look at the text below about HIV/AIDS, the two sets of notes on it and the two summaries. Compare the summaries with the original text. Which summary is the better one? Say why, bearing in mind the 5Rs and summary organisation.

Original paragraph

The HIV/AIDS epidemic threatens people in every part of the world. For example, it destroys the health, and lives, of millions of people. It also shatters families and communities and leaves millions of children orphaned. It undermines whole countries by robbing them of the young, able-bodied people needed to work in industry and agriculture. It ravages entire continents. While sub-Saharan Africa (the area of Africa south of the Sahara desert) has about ten per cent of the world's population, it has almost two-thirds of all people living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2004). (91 words)

Notes 1

HIV/AIDS threat to people everywhere
health and life destroyed
families and communities destroyed
children orphaned
countries robbed of young workers for industry and agriculture
continents ravaged, e.g. sub-Saharan Africa, where the population is more heavily affected by HIV/AIDS

Summary 1

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is a threat to people everywhere, destroying the lives of families and communities. Young children lose their parents, and there is a lack of healthy young workers for industry and agriculture, which affects economies. In some parts of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, a higher proportion of the population is affected by HIV/AIDS. (58 words)

Notes 2

HIV/AIDS tragedy
young people are robbed
two-thirds of African people have AIDS

Summary 2

The HIV/AIDS virus is causing terrible tragedies throughout Africa where two-thirds of the population are suffering from this dreadful disease. Young people are being robbed of their futures, and it is up to the rest of the world to help them. (42 words)

Provide your answer...

Answer

Summary 1 is the better summary because:

- it **reproduces** all the main points of the original text, without leaving out any of the key points;
- it **rewords** the original text in the student's own words, e.g. noting the impact on a *higher proportion of the population*;
- it is **well organised**.

Summary 2 is a poor summary because:

- it does not **reject** the right information from the original – it mentions only Africa, not the rest of the world – and fails to make the relevant point about young people, i.e. their connection to the labour market;
- it does not **reproduce** the original text but gives the student's own opinion – *it is up to the rest of the world to help them*;
- it significantly misinterprets the statistics in the text, with the note *two-thirds of African people have AIDS*.

Comment

There is a connection between good note making and good summary writing. If your notes are clear, brief and accurate, your summary is likely to be well organised.

4 Activity 4

Activity 4 Organising a summary: order of information

Sometimes, a summary writer changes the order of the original material to make it fit with their own text. Compare the original and the summary of the following two texts. How has the student changed the order? Does it still make sense, and does it include all of the relevant points, in your opinion?

Type your answers in the box below.

Original text

The global nature of the HIV/AIDS crisis means that it needs to be tackled at a global level. In other words, international action is required. A key organisation at the international level is the United Nations (UN). This is a form of global government. It is funded by contributions from governments around the world and has its own parliament, the General Assembly, in which practically every country in the world has a seat. The General Assembly meets regularly to discuss and vote on important issues.

Summary

The United Nations (UN) is a key organisation in the fight against AIDS because of its international nature. The UN is funded by several countries and has a General Assembly at which most nations are represented, so it is in an ideal position to tackle global issues.

Provide your answer...

Answer

The numbers and bold text below show how the information in the original paragraph has been reordered in the summary. The parts which have been omitted from the summary are not in bold. Nevertheless, the summary flows logically and still contains the key points.

Original text

[1] **The global nature of the HIV/AIDS crisis means that it needs to be tackled at a global level.** [2] In other words, international action is required. [3] **A key organisation at the international level is the United Nations (UN).** [4] This is a form of global government. [5] It is **funded by contributions from governments around the world** and has its own parliament, **the General Assembly, in which practically every country in the world has a seat.** [6] The General Assembly meets regularly to discuss and vote on important issues.

Summary

[3] **The United Nations (UN) is a key organisation in the fight against AIDS because of its international nature.** [5] **The UN is funded by several countries and** [6] **has a General Assembly at which most nations are represented, so [1] it is in an ideal position to tackle global issues.**

5 Activity 5

Activity 5 Organising a summary: connecting ideas

Look at the notes and the summary below. To help organise the summary, copy and paste the appropriate connecting words from the list below into the gaps in the summary.

Notes

HIV/AIDS global impact

fastest growth in Europe

1995–2003 new infections (WHO report)

Western Europe doubled: 365,000+

Central and Eastern Europe 27,000→370,000

2 implications (i) limits on individual governments (ii) global travel →spread of diseases

Connecting words:

between

first

in fact

second

according to

although

the implications of this

..... we hear a lot about HIV/AIDS in Africa, the fastest growth in the disease is happening in Europe. a World Health Organization report, 1995 and 2003 the number of new infections in Western Europe doubled to more than 365,000, and has also increased in the rest of the continent. are twofold., it shows the limitations of individual countries in preventing the spread of the infection., the popularity of global travel means that diseases will continue to spread.

Answer

Although we hear a lot about HIV/AIDS in Africa, **in fact** the fastest growth in the disease is happening in Europe. **According to** a World Health Organization report, **between** 1995 and 2003 the number of new infections in Western Europe doubled to more than 365,000, and has also increased in the rest of the continent. **The implications** are twofold. **First**, it shows the limitations of individual countries in preventing the spread of the infection. **Second**, the popularity of global travel means that diseases will continue to spread.

Comment

When you write up your notes as a summary, part of the task is to build in connections between the ideas in the summary.

6 Activity 6

Activity 6 Writing your own summary from notes

Use the following two sets of notes of two more paragraphs from the text, *Aid agencies and the HIV/AIDS crisis* (view document below), to write your own summary in the box below. Then compare your summary with the one in the Answer.

[View document.](#)

Notes: paragraph 1

UN: not just about health BUT has specialist agencies: e.g. WHO (World Health Organization) and UNICEF (UN Children's Fund) – concentrates on helping kids

Notes: paragraph 2

Other NGOs (non gov agencies) deal with health e.g. Red Cross, Red Crescent – especially when crisis e.g. earthquakes

Oxfam: helps world's poorest people

NGOs – more independent, don't get money from govts – but cooperate with govts and with UN

Your summary

Provide your answer...

Answer

Sample summary

Although the United Nations (UN) is not only concerned with health issues, this is a very important part of its work. Specialist agencies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund), deal specifically with matters of health and welfare. Other non-government organisations (NGOs) also deal with health, and have the advantage of being independent, as they do not depend on government funding. However, they often work cooperatively with governments.

Comment

How does your summary compare with ours? Did you include the main points? Is your summary well organised?

Conclusion

The previous activities focused on the strategies you need to write summaries of text. The key features of a summary are the 5Rs (reduce, reject, reword, reproduce, repackage) and summary organisation.

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