

ACADEMIC SUMMARY

An academic summary answers the three following questions about a text:

- 1. What is the author's main idea or argument?**
- 2. How does the author support that main idea or argument?**
- 3. Why did the author write the text?**

Your summary should be detailed enough so that a person who has not read the text can tell specifically what kind of text it is and what it is about.

STEPS:

1. Introduce the text to your reader. Note the title, author, type of text, and what the text is about. Remember that your reader may not be familiar with the text, so be as specific as possible. (1-3 sentences)
2. Describe the author's main idea or argument. Refer to the author by his/her name. Do not use a direct quote: instead, articulate in your own words what you think the point of the text is. (1-3 sentences)
3. Explain how the author supports the main idea or argument. Keep an eye out for how the author organizes and/or divides up the text (are there sub-headings?). Pay attention to the author's use of evidence, quotes from experts, examples from history, etc. The author might also use certain language or literary devices to support an argument. (1-3 sentences)
4. Interpret why you think the author wrote the text. What is the context, or background, for this topic? Who is the audience? What does the author intend for the audience to take away from the text?

Review your answers above and draft a 1-2 paragraph academic summary.

Summary Tips:

- Remember that the goal of your summary is to give a concise, specific overview of a text for someone who has not read that text.
- Use author-focused language; refer to the author's full name first, and then his/her last name thereafter.
- Explain the what/how/why of the text in your own words (minimal use of quotes).
- Incorporate the key concepts that the author uses or refers to in your summary. For example, if a text is about "code-switching," use that term in your summary.
- Be specific as possible. If your summary can work for any other text, it is too broad.
- Avoid the blow-by-blow, chronological account of everything that happens in a text. You do not have to move through your points in the same order that they are presented in the text.

Sample Academic Summary of Jeff Gammage’s “Wonder in the Air”

Jeff Gammage’s short essay titled “Wonder in the Air” is about his experiences raising his adopted daughter, and how he has had to change his ideas about parenting along the way. Gammage argues that sometimes preserving a child’s innocence is more important than always being truthful with a child. He supports this argument by explaining the shift he made as a father: when he first adopted his daughter, he and his wife swore they would tell her no lies. But as he was raising her, the myth of Santa Claus during the holidays became a conundrum. He realized that telling his daughter the truth about Santa Claus (that he doesn’t exist) would be more hurtful to her than keeping up with the widespread cultural lie. Gammage uses his experience to reflect on how truth is not always the best policy with a child, and how a child’s sense of wonder about the world is a special thing in itself. Gammage wrote this essay to share a personal experience that illuminates his insights about parenting, children, and the complexities in the world in which we live.

Sample Academic Summary of Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”

“Girl,” a prose poem written by Jamaica Kincaid in 1983, explores the expectations and responsibilities faced by young women in Antigua. The poem is written as series of commands that an unnamed mother issues to an anonymous adolescent girl; the directives that make up the poem instruct the girl in how to properly cook food, clean a house, care for a man, and generally be a respectable woman in that society. Kincaid uses repetition with phrases like “this is how to,” and diction that refers to culturally specific norms, like meals, songs, and common superstitions. Kincaid uses these devices to make her point that women’s roles in this society are circumscribed and heavily dependent on other people’s expectations and judgements, especially those of men. Kincaid both critiques and celebrates the mother’s role in preparing the girl for these expectations. While Kincaid presents the mother as unrelentingly authoritarian, she also implies that this mother is invested helping the girl carve out an independent and happy life. Through the poem, Kincaid suggests that the passing down of gender roles is a complex cultural inheritance in Antigua, one of survival and love.

Sample Academic Summary of Sherman Alexie’s “Indian Education”

Sherman Alexie’s short story, “Indian Education,” tells the story of Victor Polatkin (Junior), a Native American kid growing up in poverty on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Through the fictional story, Alexie argues that while schools are supposed to be places of opportunity and growth, they often subject poor, minority students to harsh situations of racism and inequality. Alexie writes of teachers who judge and punish Victor: the teacher who demanded he cut his braids, the teacher who forced him to eat paper after he aced a test, the teacher who accused him of being drunk when he was actually suffering from the effects of diabetes. In one key scene, Victor imagines becoming a doctor and saving people in an emergency room, which is a sad reminder of how he’s unable to help himself or his struggling parents in his day-to-day life on the reservation. Ultimately, Alexie wrote this story to critique the way the institutions of education betray students and are complicit in maintaining racism and inequality.

Summary Support Worksheet

Use this worksheet to help with writing a summary for almost any text!

An academic summary answers the three following questions about a text:

1. **What is the author's argument or main point?**
2. **How does the author support that argument or main point?**
3. **Why did the author write the text?**

Your summary should be detailed enough so that a person who has not read the text can tell specifically what it is about and what kind of text it is.

Here are some sentence starters to help you:

_____ (title of text), by _____ (author's full name) is about _____.

(Fill in some context or an overview of what the text is about. Be sure to note what kind of text it is.)

In this story/article, _____ (author's last name) argues that

_____ (fill in author's **main point** (or the **what**) in the text, in your own words. If the author makes a lot of points, focus on the point that seems most important overall).

_____ (author's last name) supports this point by

_____ (discuss **how** the author supports his or her main points--this could include how the author tells the story, expert opinions or facts the author includes, or any sub-points that the author makes).

_____ (author's last name) wrote this text to

_____ (include **why** you think the author wrote the text).