1.14 Writing summaries of source material

What is a summary?

A summary is a concise restatement in your own words of the main ideas or information from your sources.

Why is it important to summarize?

- Summaries help you to avoid plagiarism (always remember to reference your summaries).
- A good summary shows that you understand the original source material and that you are able to use this for your own purposes.
- Writing summaries enables you to understand the main issues of a topic and helps ensure that your writing is relevant and focussed on the question or task.
- It is usually a better way to present information than by quoting. You should only quote if the original author states something in a particularly interesting or concise way, or uses language which cannot be changed.

What are the characteristics of a summary?

- Summaries are always shorter – usually much shorter – than the original. They can, of course, vary in length, depending on the length of the original.
- They must be written in your own words, without extended quotes or paraphrases.
- They concentrate on the main points, omitting unnecessary detail such as examples.
- They preserve the original meaning and emphasis.
- They do not contain your own ideas or comments.
- The writer of the summarised information is always clearly identified by an appropriate reference. If not, you are plagiarising. See Guide 1.14.
- Any summary must be an integral part of your own text; it must serve a purpose.

Steps to writing a good summary

Step 1: Before Writing

- Go through the original text fairly quickly, but with a purpose. Ask yourself beforehand what information or evidence you are looking for, and read with this in mind.
- Decide the text's main focus and content , and the position of the writer. The main ideas will very often be stated at the beginning of a chapter or section, and

again at the end, so initially concentrate your reading here. Section headings are also a mini-summary in themselves.

- Now read again more carefully the sections that you have decided are relevant to your own purpose in writing. Don't waste time reading anything that is not relevant.
- Underline or highlight the main ideas and make short notes in the margin if appropriate.

Step 2: Initial Drafting

- Write down an outline that includes the main idea and any important supporting details. Arrange your information in a logical order.
- Restate the text's thesis (main idea) simply, in your own words.
- Restate each other important idea, again concisely and in your own words.
- Combine these sentences into the full draft summary. Remember to make a reference to the source writer, usually at the beginning of the summary:
  Strauss (2003) claims that...
  or at the end:
  (Strauss, 2003).
  In longer summaries, it may be necessary to make further passing references to the original writer to make it clear that you are still summarising. For example:
  Strauss continues by arguing that... A further point raised by Strauss is that...
  As it's the same source, it's not necessary to repeat the year of publication.
- Try and write this summary without looking at the original. Instead, base your writing on what you have understood, maybe using any notes that you have made.

Step 3: The Final Summary

- Check your summary carefully with the original text. Make sure that you haven't changed the meaning at all, that you've included all the main points, but have not included any minor information. Make sure too that the words used are your own; if you've inadvertently used language that is very close to or the same as the original, then you will need to change it. Use linking/transition words and phrases to make the summary read smoothly and logically.
- Proofread your writing for grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes. While you're doing this, particularly if you have a strict word limit, ask yourself if particular words or phrases are actually necessary to convey the meaning.
- Decide how the summary is going to fit into the rest of the writing. Why exactly are you using it?