

Reading Before You Write: Active Reading and Summarizing Strategies

Annotating Texts

Annotating is an important strategy for reading closely and critically because it allows you to track the moves that the writer is making and to register your own questions and thoughts. Try these steps:

1. Underline or highlight words/phrases that seem particularly significant, interesting, revealing, or strange to you. Look up key words that you don't know in the dictionary and write their definitions in the margins.
2. Circle key words or phrases that seem central to the essay.
3. Summarize key points in the margins.
4. Make connections to other texts (is another text you've read addressing the same issue?)
5. Place question marks in the margins next to unclear passages.
6. Write down at least two questions in response to the essay. Try to move past "right there" questions which only test recall/comprehension. Instead, try to ask questions whose answers are not explicitly found in the text: What still puzzles you? What are some of the implications of the argument that the author may not have considered? What might this author say about x? Are there moments where it is possible to take an oppositional stance – if so, what would that look like?

Descriptive Outlines (say/does)¹

The descriptive outline involves a careful mini-analysis of the meaning and function of each paragraph in a text. Here are the steps:

1. For the whole text, write:
 - A "says" sentence: a one-sentence summary of what the whole piece is saying – its main point.
 - A "does" sentence: a one-sentence summary of what the whole piece is doing or trying to do or accomplish.
2. For each paragraph or section, write:
 - A "says" sentence
 - Example: Here Gabler argues that the old definition of "celebrity" is no longer accurate
 - A "does" sentence that tells how the paragraph or section is functioning in the strategy of the whole essay, or what it is trying to do.
 - Example: In this paragraph, Gabler sets up an outdated definition and tries to convince his reader that it no longer applies. He does this by offering three examples as evidence.

¹ Excerpted from *Sharing and Responding*, by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanhoff (New York: Random House, 1989), 39-39.

TIP: Avoid letting your “does” sentence just summarize or repeat your “says” sentence. The key is to keep out of your “does” sentence any mention of the content of the paragraph. If you look at a “does” sentence out of context, you should not be able to tell whether the essay is about cars or ice cream.

Strategies for Writing a Summary

Summarizing forces writers to grapple with both the meaning and the function of each of the text’s parts. To write a strong summary, follow these steps:

1. Read the article several times, identifying main points, terms, and examples. Assess the article’s organization. Look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary. Withhold judgment and criticism; you can get more evaluative later as you become conversant with the text.
2. Write a brief “says/does” outline.
3. Make a second outline that addresses:
 - a. The question(s) the article explicitly or implicitly addresses
 - b. That article’s main parts
 - c. The article’s patterns: repetitions, strands, binaries
 - d. Aspects of the article which don’t seem to fit with other aspects
4. Write a first draft of your summary. While your summary might follow the outline of the article that you have completed, you should include a general statement or two about the article’s overall subject, procedure, and conclusions. Be sure to stick to the article’s main points, terms, and examples. Quote very sparingly, if at all.
5. Revise and edit you summary until it seems accurate, complete, objective, and well-organized, with smooth and logical transitions among ideas.