

HOW TO WRITE AN ACADEMIC SUMMARY

Academic summaries challenge you to write in active voice and describe another author's ideas in your own words. This guide walks you through six principles for writing a successful academic summary.

Disclaimer: Your professor has the final word on any assignment for their course. The UWL always refers students to their course syllabus first, which often contains your professor's expectations.

PRINCIPLE #1: WRITE ACTIVELY

Academic summaries require you to write in active voice while using **zero** to-be verbs. **This is the heart and soul of the assignment.**

USE ACTIVE VOICE

Active voice occurs when a clear subject performs a clear action. Active voice makes writing strong and concise.

Active Voice = **subject** + *verb* + **object**

Ex. **John** *hit* the **ball**.

Ex. **Winston** *emphasized* the **importance of "controlled discipline"** (41).

AVOID PASSIVE VOICE AND TO-BE VERBS

The opposite of active voice is **passive voice**, which occurs when a writer links one of the eight to-be verbs – **am, is, are, was, were, be, being, or been** – with a past tense verb. To-be verbs indicate passive voice because they do not convey action; they only convey that something exists.

Passive Voice = **object** + *to-be verb* + *verb* + **subject**

Ex. The **ball** *was hit* by **John**.

Ex. The **importance of "controlled discipline"** *was emphasized* by **Winston** (41).

PRINCIPLE #2: USE CHARACTERS AS SUBJECTS

Academic summaries require you to make the **subjects** of your verbs **clear and concrete** – the "**main characters**" of your sentence (Williams 47). Without characters, your audience will not know who is performing the action.

Weak character: Respect *is* given to leaders with controlled discipline (Winston 52).

- Because of the *to-be verb*, this sentence contains no character performing an action.

Strong character: *Winston believes* that *followers give* respect to leaders with controlled discipline (52).

- This sentence contains two clear **characters** performing two clear **actions**.

PRINCIPLE #3: USE CONSISTENT CHARACTERS

Academic summaries require you to **use the same characters throughout your sentences**. Consistent characters “create a cohesive flow” and connect your sentences together (Williams 69).

PRINCIPLE #4: GHOST WRITING

Academic summaries require you to use **ghost writing**: writing “behind” your source by **mentioning the author’s name in the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence**.

Ex. “According to Winston . . .”

“Winston explains that . . .”

“. . . as stated by Winston.”

BENEFITS OF GHOST WRITING

1. Highlights your research.
2. Forces your readers to confront the subject matter from an expert instead of a student.
3. Protects your scholarly reputation.
4. Demonstrates your critical thinking skills.

PRINCIPLE #5: ONLY USE SHORT QUOTATIONS

Academic summaries require you to **use quotes “sparingly,” limiting them to 3-4 words**. You should only quote “**KEY terms**” (Regent University 1) that you cannot put into your own words.

Ex. Williams suggests editing these clauses by making them “**resumptive,**” “**summative,**” or “**free**” (155).

PRINCIPLE #6: PARAPHRASING

Academic summaries require you to **paraphrase** the source by **putting the source’s main ideas into your own words**. Do not focus on individual words or phrases from the source. Instead, **focus on the main point the author is making** in the section you read.

TIPS FOR PARAPHRASING

1. Still cite your source.
2. Don’t look at the original wording as you try to put it in your own words.

3. Make sure your wording differs from the original. Don't just replace words with synonyms!
4. Create a new sentence structure. If your sentence structure matches the original, your paraphrase may not differ enough.

For more information and examples on paraphrasing, see our guide to paraphrasing correctly [here](#).

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