Writing a Synopsis

What is a synopsis?

A synopsis is a brief summary which gives readers an overview of the main points. In an academic context, this is usually a summary of a text (a journal article, book, report etc) but in some instances you might be writing a synopsis of a talk, film or other form of presentation. A synopsis is a neutral summary, objectively capturing the main points, rather than your own perspective or critique, and it focusses directly on the text you're summarising rather than being a wider discussion of a topic, as an essay might be.

A synopsis aims to give the reader a full, if brief, account of the whole text so that they can follow its main points without having to read it themselves. It's not a 'trailer' designed to tempt your audience to read the text itself, so you don't have to worry about 'hooking' them in with hints and high points or 'spoiling the ending' - give the whole text equal coverage, including the conclusions. You could add some commentary which gives the reader a bit of context about the text, including the authors and circumstances it was written in (for example, if it is part of a debate, particular school of thought or its significance and what impact it's had).

Challenges

Writing a good synopsis is a skill, and there are a number of challenges:

- Separating the main points from the minor detail
- Knowing what to leave out as well as what to include
- Giving a sense of the overall narrative as well as listing the key points
- Covering the whole text within a small word limit
- Knowing how closely to stick to the original, especially in terms of the wording
- Whether to give all key points equal treatment, or cover some more briefly, even combining them
- Rephrasing things concisely without losing the meaning or misrepresenting it
- Not leaving out anything crucial to understanding the whole overall message

A good synopsis will allow the reader to feel as if they'd skim read the whole text themselves, understanding the overall gist and highlighting what they need to know. A poor synopsis will get bogged down in detail, giving a confused account of the whole story by just listing points, miss out

major points or give an inaccurate or one-sided account or stick so closely to the original that it becomes plagiarism without demonstrating a real understanding by the person summarising it.

How to prepare a synopsis

Boiling down the key points and overall narrative of the original means good reading and note-taking skills which aim to identify and boil down key points to their essence. You could try some of the following approaches:

- Read the whole text, and afterwards, without re-reading, jot down your first initial summary in 50 words to capture its overall point. You can check it back for accuracy or anything you left out, but stick within ca 50 words.
- Read the introduction and first line of each paragraph to get a sense of the overall structure and key points within it.
- Highlight one sentence in each paragraph that you think is essential detail to understanding that section.
- Alternatively, with a marker pen, cross out anything that isn't essential to an understanding of the whole section or text
- Jot down only key words as a summary of each point rather than whole sentences
- Read each paragraph and summarise it without looking, in one sentence of your own
- Consider how many points you can make within your word count, and reduce or combine your list of summarised points down to this number.

You could start small, identifying just keywords or sentences at first and then work them up into phrases, bullet points and sentences as a rough plan or draft, or you could start big with the original text and reduce each section, paragraph and sentence summary again and again until you have boiled it down to its essence.

When you start to prepare your first plan or draft, try to use your notes or memory and step away from the original as much as you can. You can go back and check it afterwards, but you need to create some distance to be able to create your own account and have confidence in the points you have identified as essential.

Writing a synopsis

The main decisions facing you as you write up your summary are about how closely to stick to the original in terms of structure and style, and how much attention to give to each point.

- You could begin your synopsis with a brief context, explaining who the authors are, the context and significance of their work, as well as anything you think might help the reader to understand the following summary.
- The most common structure is to follow that of the original text, to give a sense of its narrative flow as well as the key points within it. You could choose to depart from it a little though, perhaps glossing over some points faster than others, combining two sections which go together or aren't enough in their own right, possibly even changing the order a little where it helps to combine two similar points. Careful use of signposting language will help the reader clearly follow the structure (and note anywhere you've changed it from the original) so they can identify the bit you're talking about in the original if they want to.
- The style will naturally be strongly influenced by the original wording, but you should phrase it in your own words wherever possible. It's harder to nibble away words from a much longer original than it is to start again and use your own concise phrasing, and you want to demonstrate your own understanding to the reader. You could use the odd original phrase or quotation here or there, but the synopsis needs to be more than a collage of quotations; it's a thing in its own right rather than a cut-down version of the original.
- You can also show your own response to the text in the way you use language to guide the reader to what you feel are the key points and (briefly) why. Your own voice doesn't need to be very obvious in the synopsis, as it's about the text rather than your reaction to it, but you have made analytical decisions about what is important, and might want to explain to the reader why these points are significant in understanding the whole.
- Keep in mind your reader's questions, either jotting down beforehand what you would want from the synopsis, or as you write and edit. What might the reader be asking? This isn't necessarily your structure, but might prompt you to see it from your reader's perspective and their needs, rather than that of the original writers. For example:
    - What is the main purpose of this text? What did it aim to discover, explain or prove?
    - Why was this research done? How significant is it?
    - How was the research conducted? What kind of research is it?
    - What were the three (or four, five) main things I should be aware of from this paper?
    - What is their line of argument?
    - What is their overall conclusion, recommendation, finding? Why is that important?

Managing word count

The trick to writing a concise synopsis which keeps within your word limit is not to start from the much bigger original text, but from your own boiled down notes. If you're over the word count, you could start cutting out words that don't seem essential, but if you go too far, you end up with a text which does not read well and doesn't hang together. It might be better to remove whole sentences and perhaps whole points, than nibble away at words here and there.