

Writing a book summary can serve several purposes:

- 1 as a general reading aid;
- 2 to support research;
- 3 as a revision aid for exams;
- 4 to support a book review.

Before you begin reading a book you should be sure of your purpose, and the written output that relates to that purpose.

1 Even if you read a scientific text with no immediate output objective other than general interest, it may still be worthwhile to make a summary. In order to keep your attention and concentration focused, do not only read, but also make notes in the margins of the text and add underlines. If there is an interesting argument, or some interesting quotes, it is a good idea to make a note of the information you found relevant (instead of putting it on your bookshelves or just taking it back to the library). What you do, then, is write down a short summary on a small (index) card. Write down the full bibliographical details, and note the things that you found interesting, i.e. what you underlined while reading (⊕D7). The summary need not be systematic or well formulated. The card merely serves to help you to digest the material, and later to act as an aid, should you want to return to this book at some future date.

2 If you read a book as part of a research project, you will probably not read the whole text, but only those parts that are important for the research question. The summary will, therefore, be extremely ‘focused’: only extract those parts that are of direct relevance to the research. Do not aim to write a complete summary. If you already have a detailed outline for the research project, write down summaries, quotes and paraphrases on separate pages, numbered according to the section or chapter that you want to use it in. If you use the computer while going through the book, it is easy to copy summaries and the like, which then serve as the input for different parts of the research report. Each time you write down a paraphrase, summary or quote, register the shortened reference *immediately* (⊕B2). Keep the full reference on a separate card, or create a file in the computer (⊕A8).

‘I don’t have time to read. I have to write!’ Often heard remark made by researchers.

3 + 4 It is only necessary to summarise the whole book if you are preparing for an exam or aim to write a book review. When reading the text, spend time trying to understand the author’s basic line of reasoning. Also try to understand how the argument is structured, while you read the book. It could also be relevant to be aware of the position of other authors with regards to this topic, and how the approach chosen in the book, can be positioned in the debate. Finally, if you need to write a book review or a summary in an exam, you are expected to reproduce the most important parts of the book. The aim of your reading also becomes the aim of your summary. A book review and a good summary to support your exam preparation serve similar goals. Probably the biggest difference between the summary for the exam, and the book review, is that the book review focuses on the debate, the position of the author and what is written in the book, but perhaps more importantly on what is *not* written in the book. The student summary, on the other hand, focuses more on reproducing what has been written in the book, much less on the context of the book, and probably neglects what has not been written in the book. Such a passive way of treating a text, is common practice in universities. But it would be a good thing if summaries looked more like good book reviews,

because it would imply that the writing of the summary was aimed at gaining insight rather than reproducing arguments. Moreover, insight is easier to memorise than passive reproduction. The following page lists the 'building blocks' for exam summaries and book reviews. The asterisks indicate whether a component needs more elaboration in a summary (\*) or in a review (\*\*).

## Building blocks for summaries and book reviews

### 1 Understanding the book

- Understanding the *problem area*
  - Which other approaches are relevant (if known: at least consult the *Introduction*)?\*\*\*
  - What kind of problem definition or topic demarcation did the other approaches adopt; what kind of answers did they give, and how is the approach of the book positioned in this intellectual environment?\*\*\*
- Understanding the *author*
  - What was the personal occasion for the book (consult the *Preface* regarding the question posed by the author, and the history of the choice process for this topic)?
  - What is the author's professional background (*Back cover* of the book; look in the *Bibliography* for further publications by the author)? What is the author's nationality? Does this background make the author particularly qualified to write this book?
  - Who does the author address in particular (look in the *Preface*)?

**Tip** If you are writing a book review, and include a lot of information about other books, it could be more worthwhile to aim at writing a review of a **collection of books**. Most scientific magazines prefer this kind of review, and it is also more interesting for you. A review of a collection of books comes closest to writing your own article.

### 2 Summarising the contents

- *Main line of argument*:
  - What is the research question/hypothesis?
  - How does the author build up an argument to tackle this question (kind of reasoning: inductive, deductive, methodological choices made, outline of the chapters; make use of the *Contents*)?
  - What is the plot of the story, what is the basic statement?
- *Contents of the chapters*:\*
  - List the titles of the sections and chapters (what is the logic?)
  - Repeat the categories listed under 'a. main line of argument' for each consecutive chapter. Use concise references and quotation marks (if necessary).

**Tip** If you print a summary, reveal the **full bibliographical information as a page heading**. If you have to go through lengthy summaries, it is useful to be reminded of the general theme of the book as stated in the title. (⊕D9)

**Tip** Summarising the argument of the book/chapter in **tables or along argumentation trees** (⊕B8) is more work, but creates a powerful instrument. Firstly, memorising a table or an argumentation tree is much easier than memorising pages of written information. Secondly, this makes it easier to assess the logic of the book (missing branches or boxes are revealed instantly). The latter is input for a good book review, but gives you additional support for memorising the contents before an exam.

### 3 Assessing the relevance of the book

- What did you expect when you went through the contents and the opening statements of the book? Were your expectations fulfilled?\*
- What is the added value of the book for you, personally?
- What inconsistencies have you discovered in the book (use your summarising table)?\*\*
- What contribution does the book make to the topic of the course? Should the book be on the reading list next year?\*
- Who, in particular, should read the book?

\* More important when you write a summary in preparation for an exam / \*\* More important in the case of a book review.