

Summary Dismissed

Every passage you read will present a different challenge, but being able to summarize what you read will help you become a more active reader, someone who can quickly grasp what he's reading. As you'll discover, being able to say in a few words what has taken someone else a great many can be difficult. But like any other skill, the ability to summarize improves with practice.

Here are a few pointers to get you started. Be prepared, however, to vary your technique to fit the situation.

1. As you read, pay close attention to the author's purpose.

This will help you distinguish between more important and less important information.

2. Write a one-sentence summary of the entire passage.

Consider what a newspaper reporter would want to know: the who, what, why, where, when, and how. The idea of a summary is to clarify and condense. Your goal is to create a miniature version of the passage, to repeat its essence but telescoped in size and scale. Summarize the author's ideas in the order in which he has presented them, but avoid following his wording too closely.

3. Check your summary against the original passage. Make

whatever adjustments are necessary for accuracy and completeness. Notice what you've left out. Is it essential or can it be safely disregarded?

For practice, take a look at the following passage from Jon Krakauer's thrilling book about mountain climbing, *Into Thin Air*:

People who don't climb mountains—the great majority of humankind, that is to say—tend to assume that the sport is a reckless, Dionysian pursuit of ever escalating thrills. But the notion that climbers are merely adrenaline junkies chasing a righteous fix is a fallacy, at least in the case of Everest. What I was doing up there had almost nothing in common with bungee jumping or skydiving or riding a motorcycle at 120 miles per hour.

Above the comforts of Base Camp, the expedition in fact became an almost Calvinistic undertaking. The ratio of misery to pleasure was greater by an order of magnitude than any other mountain I'd been on; I quickly came to understand that climbing Everest was primarily about enduring pain. And in subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace.

The most important thing the author tries to do in this passage is to correct a common assumption, namely that mountain climbers do it for thrills. Instead, he argues, climbers endure the work, boredom, and suffering that a climb entails to achieve a state of mind, or a serenity of soul, if you will. A summary statement to that effect might look like this:

Contrary to popular opinion, people who climb extreme peaks are seeking food for the soul, not thrills for the gut.

When you are summarizing, review any sentences you have underlined or highlighted to be sure you haven't left anything out. The main difficulty is to determine what is important and what is not. Some parts of the passage—the introduction, examples, and anecdotes—can probably be ignored. Others, including the author's purpose, theme, and key words, must not be.