A tool equally useful in college and on the job is the art of writing a good, brief summary. While writing a summary may seem to be an easy thing to do, it is actually a quite complex activity. When one writes a summary, one boils a text down to the barest of essentials. A good summary states the name of the text being summarized, the author, the thesis (main idea), and the principle supportive ideas, or, the main ways the author explains his or her thesis. And finally, a good summary states any conclusion or conclusions the author may have made. The evidence, such as the use of authorities, statistics, facts, interviews, illustrative case studies, examples, graphic evidence, and that sort of thing, usually does not belong in a summary.

Figuring out the main idea or thesis is the first job of the summary writer. The thesis is sometimes easily confused with a principle supportive idea, and especially so when one or more of the principle supportive ideas carry a big emotional payload. And the evidence is sometimes hard to distinguish from the supportive ideas or even the thesis if it is sensational or emotional in nature.

Discerning conclusions is also sometimes quite tricky. Some authors make it easy for their readers by using such terms as, “one may conclude that…” But many authors leave the conclusion as inferred, which means you, the reader, must figure it out. Writers do this not because they are lazy (some are!), but mainly because they want the reader to draw his or her own conclusions, and sometimes, the intent of the writing selection is to persuade the reader to conclude a specific thing. Other times, the intent is to inform a reader, and further, prompt the reader to think about an idea.
For this reason, we will use idea mapping in order to really discern what the relationships between ideas really are! Once we have isolated the thesis, principle supportive ideas, evidence, can conclusion(s), it is relatively easy to write a great summary.

**RULES FOR WRITING SUMMARIES:**

1. **Pre-reading:**
   a) Before you begin reading, write a sentence that states your purpose as a learner in reading the selection before you.
   b) Preview-read the selection with this purpose in mind
   c) Ask a question of the text after you have preview-read it.

2. **Active Reading:**
   a) Pen or pencil in hand, look for the principle ideas. Make margin notes on what you are reading. Highlight what you think the main ideas are.
   b) Interact with the text as you read, and as you do, either make more margin notes or take notes on the side.
   c) When you finish actively reading the text, answer your initial question(s).

3. **Post-reading:**
   a) Review your margin notes. Feel free to reread passages or sections of particular interest to you.
   b) Write a reaction response to the following questions: How did this reading affect me emotionally, i.e., what was my “gut” response? How does this line up or not line up with my own values? What parts of the reading elicited the strongest reactions?
   c) Re-read your highlighted passages and margin notes. Ask yourself if you highlighted these sections solely because they elicited a strong emotional response from you. If this is the case, then these ideas or passages may not actually be the main idea. Understandably, people tend to attach importance to things that elicit strong emotional responses.

4. **Writing the Summary**
   a) To discern the author’s **thesis** and **principle supportive ideas**:
      - Make an idea map showing the thesis (main idea), the principle supportive ideas, and the evidence supporting the ideas
      - If necessary, write a series of sentences explaining the relationship between the main idea and each principle supportive idea,
      - Add the major evidence that supports each idea, and
      - Examine your idea map to make sure that you are not confusing the thesis with any of the principle supportive ideas or with the evidence. (If you like, you can use your idea map template.)
   b) Your summary’s **first sentence should contain the name of the article, text, or passage you are summarizing, the author, and the main idea or thesis.**
   c) Subsequent sentences should explain each principle supportive idea. Use no more than one or two sentences to explain each principle supportive idea.

*This lesson was excerpted from the *Writer’s Response: A Reading-Based Approach to Writing, 4/e, p. 153-154 (McDonald, S., & Salomone, W.)* and then extensively revised by Mary Kelly-Klein, Mt. Hood Community College, for use in WR90-115 courses. All errors are the responsibility of Mary Kelly-Klein.*
d) Your final sentence will state the author’s principle conclusion or conclusions, and whether these conclusions are explicit or inferred.

e) Your summary ideally should be only one paragraph. Two-paragraph summaries are acceptable; three are not.

f) Until you really get the hang of it, share your summary with someone who is familiar with the text to see if you have correctly identified the main idea, principle supportive ideas, and the conclusions.

5. Practice! Use newspaper articles, handouts from your college classes, magazine articles, and websites for practice.