



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center

Using Writing to “Digest” a Complex Text

Use these steps to help you “digest” a complex article or study not just by endlessly rereading and highlighting it but by practicing writing about it in increasingly specific ways.

Step 1: Imagine you have just stepped into an elevator and you have two minutes, before you reach your floor, to tell someone else about your article. Try saying out loud (to a partner or just to yourself) a two-minute “elevator summary.” Your two-minute elevator summary should include

- The problem or question the authors are dealing with
- What they did to investigate or try to solve the problem or question
- What they found and why what they found matters

Step 2: Without consulting the article, now try writing one or two paragraphs that, like your elevator summary, can help another reader understand your article—the problem or question it addresses, what the authors did to work on the question or problem, what they found, and why what they found matters. Work from your memory and your understanding of the article.

- You don’t want to become so general that a reader doesn’t learn what is distinctive about the article. Use your summary to focus your readers’ attention on the specific problem or question the author(s) address, what they found, and why those findings matter.
- If you find that you can’t write a draft summary without consulting the article, use the worksheet below to see how each section of the article addresses the questions of what problem or question is presented, what the authors did, what they found, and what is significant about their findings.

Step 3: Now bring back the article and use it to further develop your summary. Also consider including *your evaluation*. Do you have questions about or see any limitations in their methods? Is there anything that the authors overlooked? Do you see limitations in the results that the authors don’t address? The below common phrases may help you see where and how you might want to expand your summary.

- Phrases to show agreement, addition, similarity: *In the first place, In addition, Equally important, Moreover, Similarly, Furthermore, Another key point*
- Phrases to show contrast, limitation, opposition: *In contrast, Despite, Conversely, Unlike, Even though, On the other hand, Except, Unless*
- Phrases that introduce conditions or focus: *In order to, In the event that, For the purpose of, Provided that, When, Whenever, Under these circumstances, In that case*
- Phrases that show results, effects, or consequences: *As a result, Consequently, Therefore, Thus, For this reason, Given these points, Overall, In essence, Altogether, Surprisingly, Significantly*

Step 4: Finally, look through the article and identify specific examples, findings, claims, or key evidence for the article’s claims that you can use to enrich your overall summary of the article, making more visible its specific concerns and unique contributions. The below common phrases may help you see how you can incorporate specific and important examples or evidence from the article into your summary.

- *For example, For instance, In particular, As an illustration, The most compelling evidence, Specifically, Surprisingly*

Introduction	What are the authors investigating and why? What does prior research show or not show?
Methods	How did the authors conduct the study and why?
Results	What did the authors find? What information or examples should I cite?
Discussion	What do the results mean? Why do they matter?
Conclusions	What next steps are needed or what new possibilities does this research open up?