

# Summary and Analysis



Summary and analysis are two common elements of college writing assignments. Both are means of examining a text. But summary and analysis are distinct, and it's not uncommon for faculty to specify that you are expected to move beyond summary into analysis. Understanding summary and analysis can help you do so.

## What is summary?

A summary is an overview of a text's main ideas. It may be short—such as a single sentence summarizing the main idea of a 300-page book. Or, it may be longer—such as a three-page overview of that same 300-page book, which would include more the book's major ideas. The level of detail depends upon the purpose and length of the summary.

Summaries typically stick to the ideas presented in the original text and do not include your ideas and/or impressions in response. In some situations, it's acceptable to mix response and summary, although you should make clear which ideas are your own and which are present in the original text.

Here is an example of a brief summary of an article which appeared on Salon.com in 2007:

*In the article "Why I Stopped Being a Vegetarian," Laura Fraser argues that vegetarianism can be selfish. She relates her personal experience with being a vegetarian for fifteen years, during which she justified her diet with the usual arguments: it's healthier, kinder to animals, and environmentally friendly. For her, each of these reasons was deeply flawed; she was actually less healthy and made so many exceptions for fish and other animal products that the other arguments didn't hold water. In the end, she suggests that these arguments are often excuses which help vegetarians to feel better about themselves when they force their omnivore friends and family to accommodate them.*

Notice that the summary explains the main points of Fraser's article and a few of her main piece of evidence for her argument; but, the summary does not include any judgment or response to Fraser's piece.

## What is analysis?

You might think of analysis as interpretation that is grounded in the text you are responding to. While summary describes *what* a text says, analysis focuses on *how* the text says it and *why* it is significant. That focus often means breaking the text down into parts in order to better understand the whole. Below is a brief analysis of the same article we summarized above.

*In "Why I Stopped Being a Vegetarian," Fraser's argument that vegetarianism can be selfish is funny and relatable, but also unlikely to convince any vegetarians to start ordering burgers. On the one hand, her personal story is told in an informal way that keeps readers engaged and amused, as when she describes her half-hearted devotion to animal rights by saying "But who was I kidding? If I were hungry enough, I'd kill a cow in a heartbeat. I'd practically kill a cow just for a great pair of shoes." The article is full of moments like these that make Fraser seem likable and trustworthy. However, this tone is also a central flaw of the article. By flippantly suggesting that vegetarians are actually selfish, she risks alienating the audience that might be most interested in her story.*

The writer has broken down Fraser’s piece, paying attention to tone (the article is funny, relatable, and engaging). Then, the writer reconsiders the whole of Fraser’s piece by examining the effect of that tone—despite being engaging, Fraser’s article isn’t likely to be convincing to vegetarians because that same humor might alienate her audience. The analysis is about *how* the text was put together, *how* it will impact readers of the article, and *why* that impact is important.

### **The relationship between summary and analysis**

Writers rarely only summarize or only analyze; therefore, it’s important to see the relationship between summary and analysis. That relationship is part of the reason why analysis can be tricky. When you summarize a text, you’re often analyzing it to determine which parts are most important and how to present them to readers. In addition, writers often use summary within analysis to explain or verify their analysis, and/or to make the reader familiar with the text they are summarizing. Below, the underlined sections within this analysis are summary or direct borrowing via quotation.

*In “Why I Stopped Being a Vegetarian,” Fraser’s argument that vegetarianism can be selfish is funny and relatable, but also unlikely to convince any vegetarians to start ordering burgers. On the one hand, her personal story is told in an informal way that keeps readers engaged and amused, as when she describes her half-hearted devotion to animal rights by saying “But who was I kidding? If I were hungry enough, I’d kill a cow in a heartbeat. I’d practically kill a cow just for a great pair of shoes.” The article is full of moments like these that make Fraser seem likable and trustworthy. However, this tone is also a central flaw of the article. By flippantly suggesting that vegetarians are actually selfish, she risks alienating the audience that might be most interested in her story.*

### **To move into analysis, begin asking questions about the text:**

- What do you see as being the message or meaning of the text or part? What aspects of the text help you arrive at that meaning?
- How are the parts of the argument arranged/organized? Is there a reason the author has presented information in that particular order?
- What assumptions do you see being made in the text? What assumptions do you bring about the text (concepts, etc.)?
- Who do you imagine the audience of the text to be and how are they addressed? Do you think the audience would be convinced by this article? Why or why not?
- Who do you think is NOT the intended audience of this text? Does it matter that they are being left out?
- Who is the author and how does he/or she come across in the text? What led you to see the author in this way?

### **Sources**

Fraser, Laura. “Why I Stopped Being a Vegetarian.” *Salon*. Salon Media Group, Inc., 7 Jan. 2000. Web. 17 Aug. 2015.