

How to Write a Book Summary, Step-by-Step

The process for writing a fiction and nonfiction book summaries is slightly different. I've included instructions for both in the steps below.

Step 1.) Decide Who It's For

Is this a formal assignment? Or is it just for your own reference?

If it's just for you, there are no rules. Feel free to leave out ideas you're already familiar with (or don't resonate with) and structure your summary however you'd like.

If it's an assignment (or you'll be sharing with others), you'll want to follow the structure outlined below and include ALL the book's main ideas. In this case, you have to be more objective and include things whether you agree with them or not.

Step 2.) Start Reading

Your mindset is important here. Don't just blaze through pages as fast as you can. Instead, read each page as if you had to teach the material to someone afterward. This helps you retain the information better (and avoid finishing a chapter and immediately forgetting what it was about).

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Step 3.) Highlight and Take Notes

You might feel like it slows you down, but it'll save you heaps of time in the long run.

There are a few ways to go about this:

1. Highlight the book and take notes in the margins
2. Use stickies to mark pages and take notes
3. Take notes in a separate notebook

Things to note in FICTION books	Things to note in NONFICTION books
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New characters• Passages that support the theme• Foreshadowing/flashbacks• Inconsistencies• Connections• Takeaways• Quotes• Etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Main idea of chapter• Supporting arguments• Interesting facts and stats• Useful analogies• Resonating quotes• Anything you don't understand• Actionable advice• Etc.

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If you're an overachiever, you can bust out your colored highlighters and stickies to mark up different types of notes (i.e. **Yellow = important quotes**, **Blue = new character**, **Pink = support for theme**).

Step 4.) Write Mini-Summaries for Each Chapter

Let's work smarter, not harder. Say you're writing a summary for a book with 30 chapters. When you finish, are you going to remember the important quotes from Chapter 7? Nope. You're going to have to go back through your highlights, chapter-by-chapter, and essentially re-read everything. That's dumb! Instead, just take 2 minutes at the end of each chapter and use your highlights to fill out this form (while everything is fresh in your memory).

Chapter Summary Worksheet Template (FICTION)

Chapter number:

Chapter title:

Setting:

Characters in chapter:

New insights about characters:

Main events:

Problems & Resolutions:

Foreshadowing / Flashbacks:

Important quotes and revelations:

Connections and Inconsistencies:

Themes:

Other thoughts:

Chapter Summary Worksheet Template (NONFICTION)

Chapter number:

Chapter title:

“Big ideas”:

Arguments supporting big ideas:

Interesting facts, stats, or analogies:

Resonating quotes:

Action steps:

Other thoughts:

When you finish the book, you'll have all the info you need to write a book summary in these handy sheets (and won't need to hunt stuff down in the book).

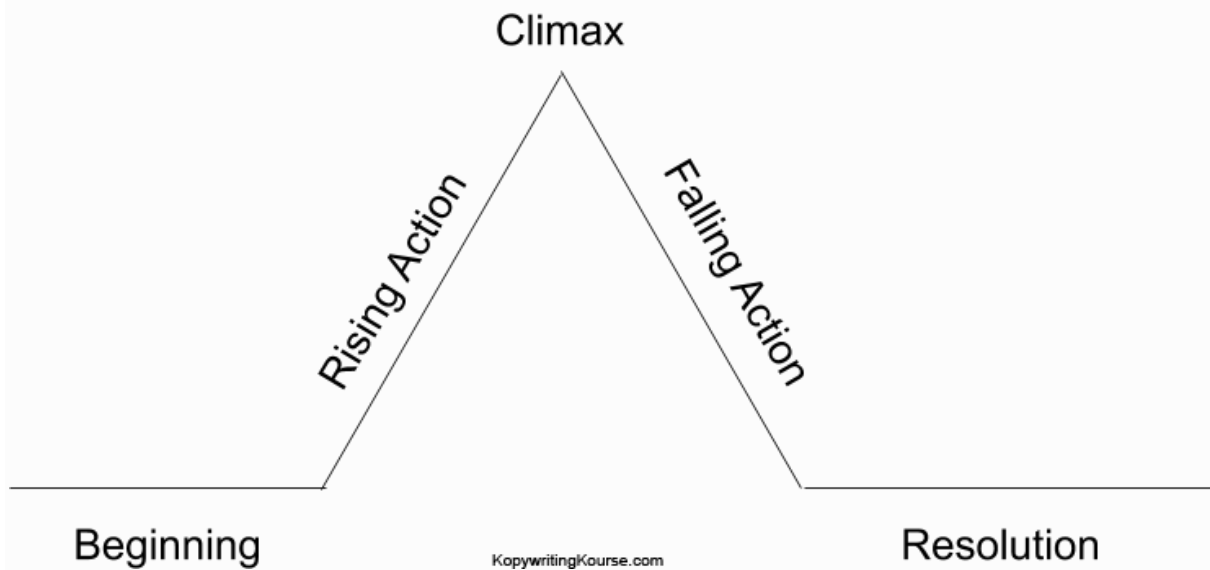
Step 5.) Organize Your Mini-Summaries

So, you have everything you need in your mini-summaries. Now you just need to organize them.

For fiction books, group them by where they fall into the story structure:

- **Beginning** (Intro to characters, setting, problem)
- **Rising Action** (Tension around problem builds)

- **Climax** (Highest point in tension)
- **Falling Action** (Resolving loose ends after tension is resolved)
- **Resolution** (Closure)



For nonfiction books, organize your mini-summaries by topic (use the Table of Contents to help).

Your final book summary should follow this structure.

Step 6.) Condense Main Points Into a Bullet List

Now, with everything laid out in front of you, scan through each summary and pick out the most important ideas and plot points. Jot these down in bullet list form on a separate sheet of paper.

When deciding which fictional plot points to include, ask yourself, “Is this information vital for understanding the ‘big picture’ of the story?” If the answer is No, cut it.

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For nonfiction books, it's much easier to decide what to include. Make a bullet list of the main takeaways from each chapter (or topic) along with the best supporting arguments.

Step 7.) Write Your Summary

At this point, all you have to do is convert your bullet list to paragraph form.

The key here is to avoid rambling. Remember, this is a summary. You're not re-writing the entire book.

Here's a trick: Imagine you're in high school and your BFF is about to take an exam on a book she didn't read. You have two minutes to explain it to her before the bell rings and the class starts. What do you include? What do you leave out?

If you have a specific page restriction, here's another tip to stay under the limit:

$$\text{Page Limit} \div \text{Number of Chapters in Book} = \text{Number of Summary Pages Per Chapter}$$

So, if you have a five-page limit and there are 10 chapters in the book, you would write roughly $\frac{1}{2}$ page for each chapter.

How to Structure A Book Summary

If it's just for your own reference, do whatever you want (I leave it in bullet form to save time). However, if you need to submit your work (and don't already have specific guidelines), use the structure below:

Book Summary Structure:

Book Summary of TITLE, by AUTHOR

Main characters:

CHARACTER 1: DESCRIPTION

CHARACTER 2: DESCRIPTION

CHARACTER 3: DESCRIPTION

Etc...

[INTRO PARAGRAPH – *Give a quick overview of the entire story and main points. For fiction, mention anything someone would need to know about how the book is written for your summary to make sense—e.g. the setting jumps backward/forward in time every chapter, point of view changes to a different character each chapter, etc.*]

[BODY PARAGRAPHS – *In each body paragraph, elaborate on one main idea/plot point from your bullet list. The number of body paragraphs will depend on how many main ideas or plot points there are.*]

[CLOSING PARAGRAPH – *For fiction, describe how the story ends and the overall theme of the book. For nonfiction, sum up all the main ideas into one overarching takeaway.*]

Here's an example of a [fiction book summary](#) and a [nonfiction book summary](#) to show you what it looks like in real life. Notice how the fiction summary follows the structure of the plot, while the nonfiction summary is organized by main ideas.

6 Mistakes to Avoid When Writing a Book Summary

To make this process as quick and painless as possible, here are some No-No's to avoid:

#1) Adding in your personal thoughts

✗ I think...

✗ I believe...

✗ I feel like...

#2) Not taking enough notes while reading. It sucks when you know you read something important, but can't remember what bleeping page it was on.

#3) Waiting too long in between mini-summaries. The more pages you read in between mini-summaries, the more likely you are to forget something important.

#4) Not writing mini-summaries immediately after reading. I don't know about you, but my memory blows. Always write while the info is fresh in your mind.

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#5) Failing to differentiate between major ideas and minor details.

If your summary gets too long, it loses its purpose. Think about what you can cut that won't distort the story.

#6) Forgetting to proofread out loud (if it's an assignment). If you spent all this time crafting a killer summary, it'd be a shame to turn it in with a bunch of silly errors.

How to Write a Book Summary Cheat Sheet

Step 1.) Decide who it's for

Step 2.) Start reading (with a "teacher mindset")

Step 3.) Highlight and take notes

Step 4.) Write mini-summaries for each chapter

Step 5.) Organize your mini-summaries

Step 6.) Condense main points to a bullet list

Step 7.) Use bullet list to write your final summary (using the provided structure)

Hope this helps make writing book summaries a piece of cake!