

Basics

There are various ways to take notes, and this will affect how you summarize them. Whatever method you choose to use, your aim will be to sum up your notes in a way that allows you to remember the information from them efficiently or to use them to do a written task without having to read through all your notes again. You should be reviewing your notes regularly if you want to do well, and summarizing them is a good way to do this.

The academic context

There is a lot of note taking involved in studying at college or university. You may have notes from lectures and seminars you have attended or notes from your personal study of books, articles, etc. Very often, you will have written pages of information which you need to learn for a test, exam or presentation, or which you want to use in an assignment. To make this information accessible it will need summarizing. Hopefully, you will have already made good notes which focus on key points and use methods like flow charts, mind maps or other visual displays, but you will still need to condense the notes a lot. Also, if you prefer to make very thorough notes which include a lot of information, summarizing is your opportunity to prepare your notes for revision or as an aid in writing tasks.

Key features

- Summarizing your notes gives you the chance to really learn the information you have in them. By breaking the information down into headings, key ideas and keywords, you can absorb it well.
- Avoid long sentences. Note the controlling ideas, using concise statements along with keywords.
- Your summary of your notes gives you a quick reference which you can read over before exams and use as help in assignments.
- You can summarize in several stages if you prefer, slowly bringing the most important information together. On each draft, you can reduce the amount of words you use to sum up. The advantage of this is that you will have gone over the information several times and therefore learnt it better. By the end, you will hopefully have no more than one side of paper with keywords and phrases which help you recall all the content you need to know.
- Read a chunk of your notes and then summarize it from memory. This helps you get ideas clear in your head and therefore enables you to do effective revision.
- Using synonyms, collective nouns and paraphrasing can help you summarize.
- Shorten your summary by using symbols and abbreviations.
- Just as you will develop your own preferred method of note taking, summarizing your notes can also be done however you wish. For example, some people like to use notecards; others use colour-coded systems. Experiment to see what suits you best.

Challenges / difficulties

It can be difficult to decide what you need from your notes, so try to find out what can come up in your tests or exams and make sure your summary focuses on that information (the controlling ideas). If you are using your notes for a written assignment, then you should make a summary focused on what it requires.

How can I develop this skill?

Practise when you have all the information about something at your fingertips. For example, whenever you make notes about a topic, write a summary immediately afterwards. Give yourself some limitations of time and writing space: for example, five minutes and a single notecard. Doing this will improve your summarizing skills and give you useful revision aids, as well as helping you to remember what you have studied.

Learning outcome

- Students will understand the advantages of summarizing their notes while studying and will learn several ways in which they can do this.
- Students will have had the chance to decide what method of summarizing helps them the most.

Theory to practice

Read some of the notes a student made in a history lecture and the summary of it on a card.

The Tudor Period from 1485–1603.

Tudor monarchs – Henry VII 1487–1509, Henry VIII 1509–1547, Edward VI 1547–1553, Lady Jane Grey 1553, Mary I 1553–1558, Elizabeth I 1558–1603

Time when population grew from 2 million to 4 million = economic, agricultural and commercial growth = period of growth. London became more important.

But rising population and changes in agriculture systems (enclosures) = pressure on growth. A lot more poor people.

Reformation – Started 1532 – very important at this time, changed from Catholic to Protestant religion.

Started when Henry VIII wanted his marriage annulled but Pope Clement VII refused, so he replaced him as head of church but still followed Catholic practices. Edward very strict Protestant. Mary brought back Catholic church, Elizabeth Protestant but not strict.

Reformation very important – income from church used in England not given to Pope

Tudors 1485–1603

6 – Henry VII, Hen VIII, Ed VI (Prot), LJ Grey, Mary (Cath), Eliz (Prot)

Pop ↑ 2m – 4m

Growth – ec/agric/comm

London import

Probs – enclosures/poor peop

Reformation 1532 Cath → Prot = annul marriage, Henry head/church ∴ church £ in Eng

- 1 Give examples of how the summary leaves out information but keeps the main points.
- 2 Say what you think is good and bad about the summary. Would you summarize your notes like this?

Ways to get more practice

- 1 Look at the notes on the Tudor period above. With your partner, come up with another way you could have summarized it.
- 2 Look at notes you have made previously and see if you can sum them up effectively on one card.