

10 The Summary Response Essay

In our first essay, we will learn how to both summarize a piece of work and then respond to it.

Do not let this essay intimidate you. We do this all the time. If you have ever been to a movie and then come home to tell others about it, you almost certainly summarized the film (unless it took you a full two hours to explain a two-hour movie, in which case all of your friends would have abandoned you.)

A summary response simply adds (get ready) a *response* to that summary. So not only would you tell your friends what happened in the movie, but you might then add this:

“But it was so stupid. I mean, the bad guy won, and I hate it when the bad guys win! Plus, the main character’s parents didn’t even come to his final game; who does that? And then...”

That is your response. So the idea of a summary response does not sound quite so intimidating now, right?

Now let’s put this in terms of an academic argument. Imagine that your local school board was considering requiring students to wear district-approved uniforms. This topic interests you, so you decide to go to a meeting where this issue is going to be debated. During the meeting, a young man stands up and makes the following argument:

The issue of whether or not students should wear uniforms to school is a hot topic. I oppose this. I do not think students should be forced to wear uniforms. There are many negatives to wearing uniforms but no positives.

First, school uniforms take away a person’s individual choice. People like—and have a right to—express their individuality, whether that be through hairstyle, makeup, music, or even the car they drive. One effective way to show your individuality is through the clothes you wear. Maybe an animal lover might wear a shirt with a picture of her dog. Someone into Ford pickups can wear a shirt with a monster truck on it. And people show their political views on their clothes all the time. This is an important part of growing up—finding out who you are, and sharing that through the choices you make, including the clothes you wear. And schools should reflect that, since it’s a part of the maturing process of their students.

And uniforms don’t change the student’s success. There has never been a study showing that students who wear uniforms do any better in school than those who don’t. Some argue that the distraction of the varying clothing styles makes it hard for students to study, but again, this has never been shown to be true.

Uniforms don't save parents any money, either. In the UK, where students wear uniforms to most schools, those uniforms often cost as much or more than the clothes the students would have chosen themselves. Because students are only allowed to wear certain uniforms, those stores that sell them can charge incredibly high prices for them, because the students and their families have no other choice. But when a student can choose to wear whatever he or she wants, stores have to compete to sell their clothes, and that drives prices down.

Many of those who support school uniforms argue that they will stop school bullying. But it is rare that bullies pick on a child simply because of how he or she is dressed. In fact, no study has ever pointed to clothing options as a reason for bullying. And to return to the UK, bullying is an even bigger problem there than in the U.S., and again, most UK students already wear uniforms. If a child is going to be a bully, he or she is going to be a bully, uniform or no uniform.

The fact is there is no valid reason to require students to wear uniforms to school. They do not increase student success, save parents money, or decrease bullying, but they do take away a student's individuality. This is not a valid trade off. Students should not be required to wear uniforms.

When you return home, a friend or family member asks you, "So, how did the meeting go? What did you think?" In response, you decide to share with this person what the student said. Since you did not think to record the speech, you are most likely going to *summarize* it, somewhat like this:

Well, this one student made some good points. He argued against uniforms. He felt that they limit individuality but do not have any positive effects. They do not increase student success or study habits, they do not save parents money, and they do not stop bullying. So his view is that there are no positives to outweigh the negatives of losing that individuality

This pretty much sums up the student's points, right? You will note that this is much shorter than the original. This is one of the key elements of a **summary**:

- A summary only includes the MAIN POINTS of a piece of communication, leaving out the details.

You do this all the time, right?

In academic writing, we just "formalize" this. In other words, we simply put it in the format of an essay, with the individual pieces further explained.

We've already discussed the different pieces of an essay:

- I. Introduction (including thesis)

- II. Because Statement 1: Provide your first supporting point for your thesis in a **topic sentence**, followed by objective evidence that supports your because statement.
- III. Because Statement 2: Provide your second supporting point for your thesis in a **topic sentence**, followed by objective evidence that supports your because statement.
- IV. Because Statement 3: Provide your third supporting point for your thesis in a **topic sentence**, followed by objective evidence that supports your because statement.
- V. Because Statement X: Continue with as many because statements as you have developed for your topic.
- VI. Conclusion

As we discussed, in a typical essay, your thesis is an argument on a topic (“Gay marriage should / should not be legalized,” “Guns should / should not be outlawed,” etc.). And then your because statements answer the question, “Why?” to back up your argument:

Thesis: Guns should be outlawed

WHY?

Because A, B, and C.

A summary response essay is a bit different. In this essay, you are arguing about **what the author said, and whether the author was right or wrong**, not about the topic itself.

In this essay, you (1) summarize what the original author said, and then, (2) you respond to the author, either supporting or refuting the points the author made.

NOTE: This is important. Do NOT respond by saying, “I agree” or “I disagree.” This mistake falls along the same lines as #6 in our last chapter with tips for better writing. Your agreement or disagreement doesn’t make the author’s argument right or wrong.

Instead, argue that the author is right or wrong, and then add the additional information to back up that assertion. Remember, do NOT talk about yourself.

A Summary Response Essay Assignment

The first essay assignment is the summary-response paper; this paper should be at least two pages (500 words) in length. To successfully complete this assignment, you will:

1. Select an article from the following:
 - a. xxx
 - b. xxx
 - c. xxx
 - d. xxx

2. Summarize the position and main claims for that position in the article;
3. Directly respond to specific claims in that article;
4. Demonstrate an awareness of the target audience and purpose of the article you are responding to, as well as an awareness of the context of that article in your response.

Basic Organizational Pattern

An example of the point-by-point pattern is given below:

1. Introduction: Setting up some context for the issue is a great way to open a position paper, as it allows you to show the issue is current. End this introduction paragraph with your **thesis statement**.
2. Summary: Summarize the position argued in the article, as well as those main claims. Use signal phrasing in the summary to keep the reader on track.
3. Claim 1: Set up the first reason/claim from the article in a **topic sentence** that also sets up your basic response to that claim. Develop a paragraph responding to that one claim, using supporting evidence to develop that point.
4. Claim 2: See above.
5. Claim 3: See above.
6. Conclusion: Think about how you can lead the reader back out of the paper.

Special considerations: Note that while you are responding to an argument, your paper is not about the topic/issue so much as it is a direct response to the claims made by the author. Expect to use clear signal phrasing in the summary and in the topic sentences to keep the paper focused on response, rather than on topical argument.

GUN CONTROL SAMPLE ESSAY

Richard Carbon
Professor Michael Jensen
ENG 101
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A Reasonable Argument

In Jack Hunter's article "How Gun Control Kills," he argues that increased gun control would have the opposite intended effect. By removing the guns from law-abiding citizens, he claims, it allows for increased crime because potential criminals could not be stopped before they attempt to harm others. His argument contains many examples and shows how parallel efforts of impeding crime have not been effective. He is correct in his argument because he presents his claim fully, and the facts support him.

Hunter begins his article discussing the Sandy Hook tragedy and the public anger which resulted from it. He mentions how this emotional outpouring, similar to that which people use to support the death penalty, is also used to support gun control. However, he argues that neither is successful in deterring violent crime. Hunter then gives several examples of armed, law-abiding citizens successfully preventing potential massacres. He quotes an article which discusses how supporters of the death penalty don't often realize the repercussions it may cause; similarly, gun control would in fact prevent citizens from protecting themselves and others from potential violent criminals. In conclusion, Hunter firmly states that if liberals are successful in terms of gun control to the degree that the majority of them wish to be, it would inevitably only lead to more death.

Hunter's first claim is that the death penalty, another tactic used to lower violent crime, has had almost no effect on overall crime rates. Many criminologists support his claim, with over eighty-five percent agreeing that there is no significant increase or

decrease of violent crimes, whether or not a death penalty is in place. This support certainly lends credibility to his claim.

Secondly, Hunter claims that gun-carrying citizens prevent many violent crimes from continuing or even taking place. He goes on to list several such events, all of which can be corroborated via other news articles. The shooting at the theater in Texas, which Hunter mentions, is just one example of that (Howerton). Several people have shared experiences of how owning a firearm has protected them (“Women’s”). My own father is a citizen who legally carries a firearm on his person, and it has prevented personal injury on more than one occasion.

Hunter’s final claim is that banning guns does not stop them from being used by criminals. The author is correct here, as well. Even if guns were unable to be sold legally, there would always be a black market for it, and violent criminals would be able to find a gun if they wanted to. Proof of this can even be seen outside of the United States, when gun violence spiked after the handgun ban in England in 1997 (johnrlott).

The claims made by the author of this article seem to be founded in fact. The death penalty has proved unsuccessful to deter crime, so similar efforts might not be as successful as some might believe. The amount of recorded events where gun-carrying citizens have prevented deaths is astounding, and banning guns would not stop guns from being used by criminals; it would only prevent such stories from ending in a positive way. Jack Hunter’s piece seems well-formulated and backed by evidence, and his argument is sound.

Works Cited

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