Summarizing: Identifying Key Ideas

What is a summary?

Scenario: You have to explain the plot (i.e., summary) of a movie to a friend in 10 seconds. What information do you include and exclude?

Information you included in your 10 second summary was probably strictly limited to the movie’s main points/ideas. Information excluded was most likely information that merely developed the main points.

Summaries are condensed versions of larger bodies of works. They contain a source’s main idea and exclude details unnecessary to understanding the source’s message.

Things to consider:

- Did you grasp the meaning of the source you’re summarizing? Could you explain it to someone who’s unfamiliar with the source?
- Knowing the general structure of your source will help you know identify its main points.
  - For example:
    - 5 paragraph essays have main ideas stated in the introductory paragraph. Additionally, main ideas can be found in body paragraphs’ first and final sentences (i.e., the topic and conclusion sentences).
    - Newspaper articles typically have main points stated within the first few paragraphs
  - If you don’t know the general structure of your source, try researching it
- Even a source’s title can provide insight into what its main ideas may be

How to get started:

1. Highlight/underline the source’s main points.
2. Write them down
3. Combine any points that seem repetitive
4. Reconstruct the main points, in your own words, into a paragraph
5. Ensure the information in your summary is presented in the same order as it was in the original source
Try this exercise:

Instructions: Read the following excerpt from Dr. Dina Kulik’s article, “This Six-Year-Old with a Vaccine-Preventable Illness Is Fighting for His Life,” and highlight the main ideas. Write a summary in the lines provided below.

Today there is a six-year-old boy lying in a London, Ontario hospital fighting for his life. He is in critical condition with a vaccine-preventable illness, tetanus. Most North Americans have never known a person who has suffered from this life threatening disease, and it isn't on most people's radars. Rare, yes. But REAL.

Across Canada, there is an average of three cases reported per year according to the Public Health Agency of Canada. It is preventable with the simple vaccines we give in childhood, and repeat every 10 years in adulthood. This vaccine is one of the most benign of the vaccine series, with minimal side effects, typically limited to mild pain and low-grade fever.

Unfortunately, with increasing public concern over vaccine safety (despite numerous studies demonstrating their safety and efficacy), we have seen a resurgence of illnesses such as tetanus. Measles and pertussis (whooping cough) scares have speckled Canadian and American population of late, and will likely continue.

In this case, the young boy suffered a puncture wound to his foot a week prior to the onset of tetanus symptoms. He was not vaccinated. (Kulik, 2015, para. 1-4)