

## Writing an Effective Summary

You already know how to summarize. You do it every time your friend asks you, “What did you do today?” You do not tell your friend every little detail, just the highlights.

Writing a formal summary is not that different than summarizing orally, yet it is difficult to do well.

To write an academic summary, you must do four things:

- 1) Identify the source of your summary.
- 2) Translate all main ideas into your own words.
- 3) Eliminate details.
- 4) Organize the information in a coherent sentence or paragraph.

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### Summarizing a Paragraph

The following paragraph, taken from Ian Leslie’s 2011 book, *Born Liars*, could be summarized in a sentence or two, but even for such a short summary, the four above requirements still apply.

We exert our powers of deception virtually from birth: even babies seem to engage in pre-verbal forms of fakery. During her research with the parents of very young children, Vasudevi Reddy of the University of Portsmouth found examples of baby behaviour that fit the taxonomy of deception in non-human primates put together by [primatologists] Byrne and Whiten: Teasing, Pretending, Concealing, and Distracting. A baby girl repeatedly puts her hands out as if to join her welcoming mother but then backs away, laughing. A nine-month-old appears to fake laughter as a way of signaling that he wants to join in with others who are laughing. An eleven-month-old baby, being made to eat, watches her mother carefully, and as soon as her back is turned throws the toast away. The simplest acts of deception, says Reddy, “seem to happen more or less simultaneously with the earliest attempts to communicate anything at all” (26–27).

- 1) Identify the source of your summary.

Author: Ian Leslie  
Book: *Born Liars*<sup>1</sup>

- 2) Include all main ideas.

- Humans exhibit the same lying behavior as primates.
- Humans lie from their earliest days.
- Lying is linked to communicating.

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<sup>1</sup> Titles of independently published works such as books, films, newspapers, magazines, and websites are indicated with italics.

3) Eliminate details.

Do not include examples, quotations, or the specific names of researchers.

4) Organize the information in a coherent sentence or paragraph.

**SUMMARY: In the excerpt from *Born Liars*, Ian Leslie claims that for humans, as for primates, deception is inextricably linked to communication and thus a part of our lives from the time we are babies.**

Note that the summary does not include exact phrases from the original paragraph. **A summary must be in your own words**; otherwise your summary could be construed as **plagiarism**. Also, a summary should be as brief as possible, and certainly no more than 20% as long as the original.

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### Summarizing an Essay

To summarize an entire essay/chapter, you may first want to do a single-sentence summary of each paragraph (or at least take notes in the margin next to each paragraph). If there is a paragraph whose main idea you cannot identify—and usually main ideas are in the first or the concluding sentence—then you need to read that paragraph more carefully or ask for help. After all, summarizing can be a chance for you to realize what you do not understand.

Read the following article and then look at the sample sentence summaries that follow.

Adapted from “Out with a Bang”<sup>2</sup>

By Kate Wong.

*Scientific American*. December 2010. 26.

A cave in the northern Caucasus Mountains may hold a key in the long-standing mystery of why the Neanderthals, our closest relatives, went extinct. For nearly 300,000 years the heavy-browed, barrel-chested Neanderthals presided over Eurasia, weathering<sup>3</sup> glacial conditions more severe than any our own kind has ever faced. Then, starting around 40,000 years ago, their numbers began to decline. Shortly after 28,000 years ago, they were gone. Paleoanthropologists have been debating whether competition with incoming modern humans or the onset of rapidly oscillating<sup>4</sup> climate was to blame for their demise. However, new findings suggest that catastrophic volcanic eruptions may have doomed the Neanderthals—and paved the way for modern humans to take their place.

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<sup>2</sup> Titles of short works published within larger works, (magazine or web articles, short stories, TV episodes, or individual poems), are indicated with quotation marks.

<sup>3</sup> enduring

<sup>4</sup> varying/changing

Researchers led by Liubov Vitaliena Golovanova of the ANO Laboratory of Prehistory in Saint Petersburg studied the deposits in Mezmaiskaya Cave, located in southwestern Russia. First discovered by archaeologists in 1987, the cave once sheltered Neanderthals and, later, modern humans. Analyzing the various stratigraphic layers, the scientists found layers of volcanic ash that, based on the geochemical composition of the ashes, they attribute to eruptions that occurred in the Caucasus region around 40,000 years ago. Because the cave preserves a long record of Neanderthal occupation preceding the ash layers but no traces of them afterward, the team surmises that the eruptions devastated the locals.

Moreover, looking more broadly at sites across Eurasia, the investigators noted that the eruptions coincided with the disappearance of Neanderthals across most of their range, save for a few groups that took refuge in the south. In a paper published in *Current Anthropology*, they propose that the eruptions precipitated a so-called volcanic winter that may have resulted in mass deaths of Neanderthals and their prey. The misfortune of the Neanderthals, however, was a boon for modern humans, who lived in southern locales unaffected by the volcanic activity. Once the Neanderthals were gone, so the theory goes, modern humans could move north unchallenged.

The team's interpretation of the data from the cave has elicited criticism from some researchers, such as Francesco G. Fedele of the University of Naples in Italy, who complained in commentaries published alongside the paper that the age of the ashes is not firm enough to draw such conclusions. Nevertheless, others, including Paul B. Pettitt of the University of Sheffield in England, called the new extinction and replacement scenario plausible. The riddle of the Neanderthals' downfall is far from solved, but the volcanic eruption theory may turn up the heat<sup>5</sup> on the competition.

#### Sentence Summaries:

Paragraph #1: We do not know why Neanderthals, who had survived in Eurasia for thousands of years, disappeared between 40 000 and 28 000 years ago, but volcanic activity may have been a factor.

Paragraph #2: Ash layers in a cave in the Caucasus region inhabited by Neanderthals and then humans suggest that the Neanderthals' disappearance coincided with volcanic eruptions.

Paragraph #3: Other caves across the region support a similar link between volcanic eruptions and the Neanderthals' decline, suggesting that there may have been a "volcanic winter." Moreover, once Neanderthals had been eliminated from the region, humans could move in unchallenged.

Paragraph #4: Scientists do not all agree on the new theory related to the Neanderthals' disappearance, but it has at least led to debate which may motivate more conclusive work.

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<sup>5</sup> intensify/ put pressure

From the above summaries, I can compile a complete summary in which I eliminate repetition and properly acknowledge the original article.

**SUMMARY: In “Out with a Bang,” Kate Wong discusses a new theory that may help explain the disappearance of the Neanderthals around 30 000 years ago. Ash layers in caves in the Caucasus region, long-inhabited by Neanderthals, suggest that their decline may be linked to heavy volcanic activity around 40 000 years ago that may have led to a “volcanic winter.” Once Neanderthals had been eliminated in the region, humans could move in unchallenged. Not all scientists are convinced by this new theory, but it has led to potentially productive debate.**

Please note that the above summary does use a quotation: “volcanic winter.” You may quote specialized terms that cannot be expressed concisely otherwise, but should try to stick to your own words whenever possible. This will ensure that you have understood what you are summarizing.