

Writing a Summary

For each chapter of *The Hobbit* that you read, you are required to write a summary into your Journal. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines **summary** as “a condensed statement of the substance or principal points of a larger work.” In other words, a summary makes a longer work more compact by “boiling down” its key points *in your own words*.

For example, the first chapter of J. R. R. Tolkien’s novel, *The Hobbit*, is 23 pages long. Yet an effective summary of that chapter might be no more than 2 or 3 paragraphs long. For our purposes, I’d like you to begin learning how to write summaries by applying the following formula: **1 sentence per page of reading**. This means that your goal for a summary of chapter one of *The Hobbit* is to write approximately 23 sentences. This formula is a “rule of thumb”—an approximation. Some pages will easily and obviously lend themselves to summary in a single sentence. Others might beg for more. Some might not seem to require any. As with all rules of thumb, use your own best judgment and common sense when applying this formula.

For each summary entry in your Journal, write the number and the title of the chapter at the top of the page. Then simply write out your summary in your own words in either blue or black ink. With continued practice, this activity will improve your reading and writing skills tremendously.

The following few paragraphs are a summary of the whole story of *The Hobbit*. Obviously, this is an extreme example of summary, ignoring many of the story’s key details in favor of “summing up” the whole thing. Perhaps it and other summaries you have read will serve as models for your own work.

Bilbo Baggins is a happy, sedentary sort of hobbit, leading a comfortable, predictable life filled with no wild adventures or daring risks—that is, until Gandalf comes to his door.

What Gandalf proposes to an overwhelmed Bilbo is the chance to be a burglar on a grand and dangerous adventure. His job would be to help the dwarves regain their lost fortune, a treasure that rests at the bottom of Lonely Mountain, guarded by the fierce dragon, Smaug. Reluctant but curious, Bilbo accepts the position, a position that changes his life dramatically.

In the year-long journey that follows, Bilbo and his traveling companions encounter hazardous terrain and formidable foes. Many are the times Bilbo wishes to be in his warm, secure hobbit hole again. But the experience of adventure brings out the resourcefulness and courage in Bilbo’s character, and these once latent strengths play an integral part in the dwarves’ victorious recovery of their fortune.

The Hobbit invites readers to a fantasy world full of implausible, wonderful, memorable characters with whom we can often identify. Perhaps we, along with Bilbo Baggins, can learn to suspend what we are accustomed to doing and believing, and enter the captivating world of Middle Earth.

What makes a good summary? There are three traits that make a summary effective. As you write your summaries, try to include each of these traits in your writing:

- (1) A good summary is **brief**. Because it leaves out most of the details of the original, it is much shorter; it's goal is to tell the basic content of the original in nutshell form.
- (2) A good summary preserves the same **order** of events and/or ideas as the original. It attempts to preserve the chronology of the original text.
- (3) A good summary replicates the author's **emphasis** and sense of proportion. If one idea or event is more important than the others, your summary should reflect that.

It may take a little while to get good at writing summaries. With practice, and keeping an eye on our three goals, your skill will improve. Your reading, thinking, and writing skills will improve with repeated effort.