

RTW Plus: Summary Writing

Students are frequently asked to summarize what they have read. A summary is a brief, objective report of the main ideas presented by the author in a text (article, essay, book chapter, etc.). The summary is not a critique or personal response to the text, it merely states the author's important ideas. A significant challenge of summary-writing is to provide sufficient information to fully capture the text, without getting bogged down in too much detail. The two examples below are summaries of an essay in the "Searching for Truths" unit of The Reflective Woman CORE course. The first example is in the RTW format. RTW is a text-based method of writing that emphasizes the prioritization of three main ideas from a reading, and then uses direct quotations from the text as evidence in support of those ideas.

"Evidence and the Projects of Rationality" William Andrew
Myers

While there are many different approaches to exploring and understanding the complexity of our world, in this essay Myers emphasizes the power of a scientific approach. Throughout its history, Western civilizations have understood the universe to be a rational, orderly place which can be understood through the powers of observation and reason. Myers describes the process begun by the ancient Greeks, expanded by the Medieval Europeans, and carried out by present day scientists: "Starting from what we know to be true we can investigate and reason to new knowledge that is grounded in evidence" (142). Improvements in measuring devices (telescopes, microscopes, etc.) and information gained from travel to distant places required scientists to continually expand and redefine their thinking about how the world worked. Gradually the paradigm of the scientific method solidified this approach. "These ideas, *testability, exact measurement, and repeatability of observations*, are the basis for scientific practice in our time" (145). A community of scientists in each discipline share their findings, ask new questions, pose new hypotheses, and continually challenge each other for more thorough and precise explanations of our world. Some phenomena, however, fall outside of the range of scientific inquiry. Citing belief by many Americans in astrology, ley lines, and creationism, Myers contends that "what is behind the whole concept . . . is a belief system that has at its center a concept that cannot be verified within the methodologies of the physical sciences" (151). Belief in energy fields, traditional lore, and religious faith are the foundations of these phenomena, not science. To conclude, Myers' purpose was not to denigrate what he terms 'nonscience', but simply to show how it differs from what can be understood through the paradigm of science.

Myers, W.A. (2014). Evidence and the projects of rationality. In C.K. Farr, M.M. Phillips, & N.A. Heitzeg (Eds.), *The Catherine core reader* (pp. 141–158). Acton, MA: XanEdu.

Traditionally summaries do not include direct quotations. The second example is a traditional, non-RTW summary of the same essay.

“Evidence and the Projects of Rationality”

William Andrew Myers

In order to address the confusion he sees in modern American society regarding science, Myers provides a brief history and explanation of the basics of the scientific method. He then contrasts this approach to understanding truths about the natural world with several non-scientific belief systems. He begins the essay by relating 19th century philosopher Peirce’s idea that there are four ways that people typically form their beliefs, and that the method of science is just one of these ways. Beginning with the ancient Greeks, who relied on careful observations, through the Medieval European astronomers and biologists, to the natural and social scientists of the present day, the scientific method has emphasized hypothesis testing, careful measurement, and repeatability of results. This is a very particular way of attempting to understand the world, and makes up the paradigm of science. Myers reports on Kuhn’s description of how science occasionally undergoes momentous shifts which fundamentally alter our understanding of how the world works. While there are discipline-specific paradigms, such as physics or chemistry, there is also a large-scale paradigm of scientific research in general. It is this understanding of how science works that Myers says has become muddled in the minds of many contemporary Americans. He cites three examples to illustrate: astrology, ley lines, and creationism. In each of these cases, he demonstrates that it is something other than science that undergirds the thinking. It may be tradition, lore, religious or New Age beliefs that form the basis for these theories or ideologies, but Myers asserts that they cannot be explained or defended using the methods of science; they are simply outside the scientific paradigm. Myers is careful not to say these beliefs are untrue, but simply that they are not governed by the laws of science. He cites Stephen Jay Gould’s request for ‘respectful noninterference’ between these very different domains of science and non-science. Myers says religion and science should not be in conflict with each other; his purpose was to show that they are simply very different means of establishing beliefs. He applauds the scientific method as a very effective way of understanding the world, but he acknowledges that human beings need other ways to understand our world as well.

Myers, W.A. (2014). Evidence and the projects of rationality. In C.K. Farr, M.M. Phillips, & N.A. Heitzeg (Eds.), *The Catherine core reader* (pp. 141–158). Acton, MA: XanEdu.



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