

RTW Plus: Summaries vs. Arguments

Writing a paragraph or essay that summarizes is different than writing a paragraph or essay that critically reflects on a given topic and/or advances a unique argument. Because summative writing tends to come more naturally to us, our goal here is to understand how to move beyond summaries into the realm of genuine critical reflection. To get a sense of what this actually looks and feels like, we're going to carefully examine the difference between a paragraph that summarizes and a paragraph that advances an argument, using the RTW method as our guide in both cases.

Let's begin with the obvious: a summary simply restates the point of something in different words, whereas an argument goes beyond this in saying something new. Think of the difference between reading a description of a movie and reading a review about a movie. The former is meant to communicate what the film is about as clearly as possible, and the latter critically reflects on some aspect of the film. While this example might seem to imply that summaries are objective and arguments subjective, this isn't quite true. A piece of writing that persuasively advances an argument is much more than the mere offering of an opinion. Moreover, one usually doesn't have to argue for the legitimacy of a summary; for the most part it's either an adequate representation of a piece or it isn't. Of course, evaluating the quality of a summary isn't totally black and white, but for the most part summaries try to avoid the gray area. The gray area, however, is precisely where arguments make their home. This space in between pure objectivity (i.e., the facts, and nothing but the facts) and unabashed subjectivity (i.e., mere opinion) is where most of the interesting stuff happens. Summaries report on the black and white. Arguments dive into and critically reflect on the gray.

Determining the difference between a summary and an argument is easy. Simply ask yourself if what you've written or read needs to be defended in some way. If it doesn't, then you've probably got a summary, but if it does, you've got an argument. In order to advance a unique claim about something you've interacted with (e.g., a text, a film, a lecture, etc.) you first have to understand it, which is to say, you need to be able to summarize it.

To make this a little more concrete, let's take an example from the theology section of *The Sacramental Life* (THEO2040) and examine Rob Bell's introduction to *Velvet Elvis*, "Welcome to My Velvet Elvis." With that text in mind, consider the difference between these two topic sentences: the first is a pure summary, the second introduces an argument.

SUMMARY: Rob Bell's understanding of Christianity is based on the idea that it is an everchanging, dynamic tradition.

ARGUMENT: Rob Bell's understanding of Christianity as an ever-changing, dynamic tradition has significant implications for the way we understand God.

Anyone who has read the text should be able to provide the same summary, or something very close to it. And while the same could be said about this particular argument (as it isn't very controversial or bold), the point is to see that a solid argument implicitly includes the summary component while also going beyond it in a non-trivial way. Now, this particular argument isn't that interesting insofar as it's fairly obvious based on what the author says throughout the book. That being said, because it isn't merely a summary of what the author has written it would still need to be defended over the course of a paragraph. With that in mind, let's take the same basic idea and examine a topic sentence that introduces a slightly more elaborate argument.

ARGUMENT: Rob Bell's understanding of Christianity as an ever-changing, dynamic tradition entails that it is impossible to say a final word about its ultimate meaning and significance.

Notice that the topic sentence of a paragraph that introduces an argument is inclusive of summary even though it's still in need of rigorous defense. Again, the key here is that a critical reflection paper is intended to be more than just a plain old summary of the material.

Because the topic sentence of a paragraph that advances an argument is itself a type of claim, an important question is how to differentiate it from the "claim" element of a CER. In other words, when writing a paragraph that advances an argument, how do we make the "claim" of our CERs more than just a restatement of the topic sentence?

The short answer is that the "claim" element of your first CER will make the central idea introduced by the topic sentence more specific. For instance:

CLAIM: If Bell is correct that developments in a tradition bear the shape of a painting rather than a photocopy, then it stands to reason that there won't be just one way to portray it, as there isn't one single correct way to paint something.

This claim could be substantiated by a few different types of "evidence." For instance, you could paraphrase Bell's own argument for why the development of a tradition is more like painting than photocopying, you could provide a quote that speaks to the same idea, or you could even offer your own account for the coherence of Bell's idea. For example, you could say:

EVIDENCE: Even if we concede that there are core elements of a tradition that remain essentially the same over the course of time, it seems undeniable that changes in culture will naturally lead to new interpretations of these core elements. Think of the myriad ways that the significance of the crucifixion has been interpreted.

The "rationale" element will then elaborate on the evidence provided, demonstrating why and how each of the previous elements fit together in support of the argument advanced in the topic sentence. For instance:

RATIONALE: Setting aside for the moment that all religions are cultural phenomena, for tangible support of Bell's thesis we need look no further than the variety of ways that Christianity is expressed and practiced throughout the world today.

From here you could either develop another CER (if appropriate) or move to the conclusion sentence.

The "conclusion" sentence of such a paragraph will be a restatement of the main argument being advanced, but in such a way that it segues into the next aspect of the argument. For instance:

CONCLUSION: While this understanding of the Christian tradition certainly makes for a beautiful metaphor that is easy to picture (pun unintended), it raises the admittedly tricky question of how we decide which "paintings" embody greater degrees of truth.

Approaching conclusion sentences in this manner allows them to give your paper a sense of flow and forward momentum. The example sentence above seamlessly transitions into the next aspect of the argument:

ARGUMENT (NEXT PARAGRAPH): This is not to say that "truth" is a matter of deciding which paintings are closer to the original, as even the idea of an original painting is rendered questionable by the thrust of Bell's argument, but rather of deciding which paintings are faithful rehearsals of the spirit of the original artist, Jesus of Nazareth.

The above example demonstrates the difference between a paragraph that simply summarizes and a paragraph that critically reflects on an aspect of a piece by developing an argument. Again, notice that whereas summaries are generally black and white, persuasive arguments are far more open-ended. This gives you a higher degree of freedom when writing a critical reflection paper. Regardless of the type of writing that a particular assignment requires, it should be clear that the RTW method is a fantastic tool for the formation of quality paragraphs and essays.