11
Summarizing and Abstracting Information

A *summary* is a concise statement of the main points and conclusions in a longer document. For those readers who are interested only in the big picture, the entire report may not be relevant, so most long reports are commonly preceded by some type of summary.

PURPOSE OF SUMMARIES

On the job, you have to write concisely about your work. You might report on meetings or conferences, describe your progress on a project, or propose a money-saving idea. A routine assignment for many new employees is to provide superiors (decision makers) with summaries of the latest developments in their field.

Researchers and people who must act on information need to identify quickly what is most important in a long document. An abstract is a type of summary that does three things: (1) shows what the document is all about; (2) helps users decide whether to read all of it, parts of it, or none of it; and (3) gives users a framework for understanding what follows.

An effective summary communicates the *essential message* accurately and in the fewest words. Consider the following passage:

> The lack of technical knowledge among owners of television sets leads to their suspicion about the honesty of television repair technicians. Although television owners might be fairly knowledgeable about most repairs made to their automobiles, they rarely understand the nature and extent of specialized electronic repairs. For instance, the function and importance of an automatic transmission in an automobile are generally well known; however, the average television owner knows nothing about the flyback transformer in a television set. The repair charge for a flyback transformer failure is roughly $150—a large amount to a consumer who lacks even a simple understanding of what the repairs accomplished. In contrast, a $450 repair charge for the transmission on the family car, though distressing, is more readily understood and accepted.

Three ideas make up the essential message: (1) television owners lack technical knowledge and are suspicious of repair technicians; (2) an owner usually understands even the most expensive automobile repairs; and (3) owners do not understand or accept expenses for television repairs. A summary of the above passage might read like this:

> Because television owners lack technical knowledge about their sets, they are often suspicious of repair technicians. Although consumers may understand expensive automobile repairs, they rarely understand or accept repair and parts expenses for their television sets.

NOTE *For letters, memos, or other short documents that can be read quickly, the only summary needed is usually an opening thesis or topic sentence that previews the contents.*

Summaries are vital to key executives and other decision makers who have no time to read in detail everything that crosses their desks. For example one recent U.S. president required that all significant world news for the last twenty-four hours be condensed to one printed page and placed on his desk first thing each morning. Another president employed a full-time writer/researcher who summarized articles from relevant and reputable magazines.

WHAT USERS EXPECT FROM A SUMMARY

Whether you summarize your own documents (like the sample on page 649) or someone else's, users will have these expectations:

- *Accuracy:* Users expect a summary to precisely sketch the content, emphasis, and line of reasoning from the original.
- *Completeness:* Users expect to consult the original document only for more detail—but not to make sense of the main ideas and their relationships.
- *Readability:* Users expect a summary to be clear and straightforward—easy to follow and understand.
- *Conciseness:* Users expect a summary to be informative yet brief, and they may stipulate a word limit (say, two hundred words).
- *Nontechnical style:* Unless they are all experts, users expect plain English.

Although the summary is written last, it is read first. Take the time to do a good job.

A SITUATION REQUIRING A SUMMARY

Assume that you work in the information office of your state's Department of Environmental Management (DEM). In the coming election, citizens will vote on a referendum proposal for constructing the state's first nuclear power plant. Referendum supporters argue that nuclear power would help solve the growing problem of acid rain and global warming from burning fossil fuels. Opponents argue that nuclear power is expensive and unsafe.

To clarify the economic, environmental, and safety issues for voters, the DEM is preparing a newsletter that will be mailed to each registered voter. You have been assigned the task of researching the recent data on nuclear power and summarizing them for newsletter readers. Here is one of the articles marked up and then summarized according to the guidelines on page 199.

AN ARTICLE TO BE SUMMARIZED

U.S. Nuclear Power Industry: Background and Current Status

The U.S. nuclear power industry, while currently generating more than 20 percent of the Nation's electricity, faces an uncertain future. No nuclear power plants have been ordered since 1978, and more than 100 reactors have been cancelled, including all ordered after 1973. No units are currently under active construction; the Tennessee Valley Authority's Watts Bar I reactor, ordered in 1970 and licensed to operate in 1996, was the last U.S. nuclear unit to be completed. The nuclear power industry's troubles include a slowdown in the rate of growth of electricity demand, high nuclear power plant construction costs, public concern about nuclear safety and waste disposal, and a changing regulatory environment.

Obstacles to Expansion

High construction costs are perhaps the most serious obstacle to nuclear power expansion. Construction costs for reactors completed within the last decade have ranged from $2 billion to $6 billion, averaging about $3,000 per kilowatt of electric generating capacity (in 1995 dollars). The nuclear industry predicts that new plant designs could be built for about half that amount, but construction costs would still substantially exceed the projected costs of coal- and gas-fired plants.

Of more immediate concern to the nuclear power industry is the outlook for existing nuclear reactors in a deregulated electricity market. Electric utility restructuring, which is currently under way in several States, could increase the competition faced by existing nuclear plants. High operating costs and the need for costly improvements and equipment replacements have resulted in the permanent shutdown during the past decade of 10 U.S. commercial reactors before completion of their 40-year licensed operating periods. Several more reactors are currently being considered for early shutdown.

Nevertheless, all is not bleak for the U.S. nuclear power industry, which currently comprises 109 licensed reactors at 68 plant sites in 38 States. Electricity production from U.S. nuclear power plants is greater than that from oil, natural gas, and hydropower, and behind only coal, which accounts for approximately 55 percent of U.S. electricity generation. Nuclear plants generate more than half the electricity in six states.

Average operating costs of U.S. nuclear plants have dropped during the 1990s, and costly downtime has been steadily reduced. Licensed commercial reactors generated electricity at an average of 75 percent of their total capacity in 1996, slightly below the previous year's record.

Global warming that may be caused by fossil fuels—the "greenhouse effect"—is cited by nuclear power supporters as an important reason to develop a new generation of reactors. But the large obstacles noted above must still be overcome before electric utilities will order new nuclear units.

Reactor manufacturers are working on designs for safer, less expensive nuclear plants, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has approved new regulations to speed up the nuclear licensing process, consistent with the Energy Policy Act of 1992. Even so, the Energy Information Administration forecasts that no new U.S. reactors will become operational before 2010, if any are ordered at all.

SAFETY CONCERNS

Controversy over safety has dogged nuclear power throughout its development, particularly following the Three Mile Island accident in Pennsylvania and the April 1986 Chernobyl disaster in the former Soviet Union. In the United States, safety-related shortcomings have been identified in the construction quality of some plants, plant operation and maintenance, equipment reliability, emergency planning, and other areas. In addition, mishaps have occurred in which key safety systems have been disabled. NRC's oversight of the nuclear industry is an ongoing issue: nuclear utilities often complain that they are subject to overly rigorous and inflexible regulation, but nuclear critics charge that NRC frequently relaxes safety standards when compliance may prove difficult or costly to the industry.

In terms of public health consequences, the safety record of the U.S. nuclear power industry has been excellent. In more than 2,000 reactor-years of operation in the United States, the only incident at a commercial power plant that might lead to any deaths or injuries to the public has been the Three Mile Island accident, in which more than half the core melted. Public exposure to radioactive materials released during that accident is expected to cause fewer than five deaths (and perhaps none) from cancer over the following 30 years. An independent study released in September 1990 found no "convincing evidence" that the Three Mile Island accident had affected cancer rates in the area around the plant. However, a study released in February 1997 concluded that much higher levels of radiation may have been released during the accident than was previously believed.

The relatively small amounts of radioactivity released by nuclear plants during normal operation are not generally believed to pose significant hazards. Documented public exposure to radioactivity from nuclear power plant waste has also been minimal, although the potential long-term hazard of waste disposal remains controversial. There is substantial scientific uncertainty about the level of risk posed by low levels of radiation exposure; as with many carcinogens and other hazardous substances, health effects can be clearly measured only at relatively high exposure levels. In the case of radiation, the assumed risk of low-level exposure has been extrapolated mostly from health effects documented among persons exposed to high levels of radiation, particularly Japanese survivors of nuclear bombing.

The consensus among most safety experts is that a severe nuclear power plant accident in the United States is likely to occur less frequently than one every 10,000 reactor-years of operation. These experts believe that most severe accidents would have small public health impacts and that accidents causing as many as 100 deaths would be much rarer than once every 10,000 reactor-years. On the other hand, some experts challenge the complex calculations that go into

predicting such accident frequencies, contending that accidents with serious public health consequences may be more frequent.

Regulation

For many years, a top priority of the nuclear industry was to modify the process for licensing new nuclear plants. No electric utility would consider ordering a nuclear power plant, according to the industry, unless licensing became quicker and more predictable, and designs were less subject to mid-construction safety-related changes ordered by NRC. The Energy Policy Act of 1992 largely implemented the industry's goals.

Nuclear plant licensing under the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 had historically been a two-stage process. NRC first issued a construction permit to build a plant and then, after construction was finished, an operating permit to run it. Each stage of the licensing process involved complicated proceedings. Environmental impact statements also are required under the National Environmental Policy Act.

Over the vehement objections of nuclear opponents, the Energy Policy
Act provides a clear statutory basis for one-step nuclear licenses, allowing completed plants to operate without delay if construction criteria are met. NRC would hold preoperational hearings on the adequacy of plant construction only in specified circumstances.

A fundamental concern in the nuclear regulatory debate is the performance of NRC in issuing and enforcing nuclear safety regulations. The nuclear industry and its supporters have regularly complained that unnecessarily stringent and inflexibly enforced nuclear safety regulations have burdened nuclear utilities and their customers with excessive costs. But many environmentalists, nuclear opponents, and other groups charge NRC with being too close to the nuclear industry, a situation that they say has resulted in lax oversight of nuclear power plants and routine exemptions from safety requirements.

Primary responsibility for nuclear safety compliance lies with nuclear utilities, which are required to find any problems with their plants and report them to NRC. Compliance is monitored directly by NRC, which maintains at least two resident inspectors at each nuclear power plant. The resident inspectors routinely examine plant systems, observe the performance of reactor personnel, and prepare regular inspection reports. For serious safety violations, NRC often dispatches special inspection teams to plant sites.

Decommissioning and Life Extension

When nuclear power plants end their useful lives, they must be safely removed from service, a process called decommissioning. NRC requires nuclear utilities to make regular contributions to special trust funds to ensure that money is available to remove all radioactive material from reactors after they closed. Because no full-sized U.S. commercial reactor has yet been completely decommissioned, which can take several decades, the cost of the process can only be estimated. Decommissioning cost estimates cited by a 1996 Department of Energy report, for one full-sized commercial reactor, ranged from about $150 million to $600 million in 1995 dollars.

It is assumed that U.S. commercial reactors could be decommissioned at the end of their 40-year operating licenses,

although several plants have been retired before their licenses expired and others could seek license renewals to operate longer. NRC rules allow plants to apply for a 20-year license extension, for a total operating time of 60 years. Assuming a 40-year lifespan, more than half of today's 109 licensed reactors could be decommissioned by the year 2016.

Source: *Congressional Digest* Jan. 1998: 7+.

Assume that in two early drafts of your summary, you rewrote and edited; for coherence and emphasis, you inserted transitions and combined related ideas. Here is your final draft.

A SUMMARY

U.S. Nuclear Power Industry: Background and Current Status

Although nuclear power generates more than 20 percent of U.S. electricity, no plants have been ordered since 1978, orders dating to 1973 are cancelled, and no units are now being built. Cost, safety, and regulatory concerns have led to zero growth in the industry.

Nuclear plant construction costs far exceed those for coal- and gas-fired plants. Also, high operating and equipment costs have forced permanent, early shutdown of 10 reactors, and the anticipated shutdown of several more.

On the positive side, the 109 licensed reactors in 38 states produce roughly 22 percent of the nation's electricity—more than oil, natural gas, and hydropower combined, and second only to coal, which produces roughly 55 percent. Moreover, nuclear power is cleaner than fossil fuels. Yet, despite declining costs and safer, less expensive designs, no new reactors could come online earlier than 2010—if any were ordered.

Safety concerns persist about plant construction, operation, and maintenance, as well as equipment reliability, emergency planning, and NRC's (Nuclear Regulatory Commission) oversight of the industry. Scientists disagree over the extent of long-term hazards from low-level emissions during plant operation and from waste disposal.

Except for the 1979 partial meltdown at Three Mile Island, however, the U.S. nuclear power industry has an excellent safety record for more than 2,000 reactor-years of operation. Most experts estimate that a severe nuclear accident in the United States will occur less than once every 10,000 reactor-years, but other experts are less optimistic.

Central to the nuclear power controversy is the NRC's role in policing the industry and enforcing safety regulations. Industry supporters claim that overregulation has created excessive costs. But opponents charge the NRC with lax oversight and enforcement.

One final unknown involves "decommissioning": safely closing down an aging power plant at the end of its 40-year operating life, a lengthy process expected to cost $150 million to $600 million per reactor.

Source: *Congressional Digest* Jan. 1998: 7+.

The version above is trimmed, tightened, and edited: word count is reduced to less than 20 percent of original length. A summary this long serves well in many situations, but other audiences might want a briefer and more compressed summary—say, roughly 15 percent of the original:

A MORE COMPRESSED SUMMARY

U.S. Nuclear Power Industry: Background and Current Status

Although nuclear power generates more than 20 percent of U.S. electricity, cost, safety, and regulatory concerns have led to zero growth in the industry. Moreover, operating and equipment costs are forcing many permanent, early shutdowns.

On the positive side, nuclear reactors generate more of the nation's electricity than all other fossil fuels except coal—and with far less pollution. Yet, despite declining operating costs and safer, less expensive designs, no new reactors could come online earlier than 2010—if any were ordered.

Safety concerns persist about plant construction, operation, and maintenance as well as equipment reliability, emergency planning, and NRC (Nuclear Regulatory Commission) oversight. Scientists disagree over the probability of a severe accident and the long-term hazards from normal, low-level emissions or from waste disposal. Except for the 1979 partial meltdown at Three Mile Island, however, the U.S. industry's safety record remains excellent.

Also controversial is the NRC's role in policing and enforcement. Industry supporters claim that excessive regulation has created excessive costs. But opponents charge the NRC with lax oversight and enforcement.

Finally, "decommissioning," safely closing down an aging power plant at the end of its operating life, is a lengthy and costly process.

Source: *Congressional Digest* Jan. 1998: 7+.

Notice that the essential message remains intact; related ideas are again combined and fewer supporting details are included. Clearly, length is adjustable according to your audience and purpose.

FORMS OF SUMMARIZED INFORMATION

In preparing a report, proposal, or other document, you might summarize works of others as part of your presentation. But you will often summarize your own material as well. For instance, if your document extends to several pages, it might include different forms of summarized information, in different locations, with different levels of detail: *closing*

summary, informative abstract, descriptive abstract, or *executive abstract*[1] (Figure 11.1).

The Closing Summary

A *closing summary* appears at the beginning of a Conclusion section or at the end of a report's Body sections. It enables readers to review and remember the preceeding main points or major findings. This look back at "the big picture" also helps readers appreciate and understand the conclusions and recommendations that will follow. (See pages 627 and 638 for examples.)

The Informative Abstract ("Summary")

Readers often appreciate condensed versions of reports. Some of these readers like to see a capsule version of the report before reading the complete document; others simply want to know basically what a report says without having to read the full document.

In order to meet reader needs, the *informative abstract* appears just after the title page. This type of summary tells the reader essentially what the full document says: It identifies the need or issue that has prompted the report; it describes the research methods used; it reviews the facts and findings; and it condenses the report's conclusions and recommendations. (See page 649 for an example.)

Actually, the title "Informative Abstract" is not used much these days. You are more likely to encounter the title "Summary." A more specific heading titled "Executive Summary" (or "Executive Abstract") refers to material summarized for readers who may not understand all the technical details contained in the report (See page 209). By contrast, a "Technical Summary" (or "Technical Abstract") is aimed at readers at the same technical level as the author of the report. You may need two or three levels of summary for report readers who have different levels of technical expertise.

See Chapter 25 for more discussion of the Summary section in a report.

The Descriptive Abstract

Another, more compressed form of summarized information can precede the full document (usually on its title page): a *descriptive abstract* merely describes what the report is about—its nature and extent. This type of abstract helps potential readers decide whether to read the document. It presents the broadest view and offers no major facts from the

original. Compare, for example, the abstract that follows with the article summary on page 206:

A DESCRIPTIVE ABSTRACT

> **U.S. Nuclear Power Industry: Background and Current Status**
>
> The track record of the U.S. nuclear power industry is examined and reasons for its lack of growth are identified and assessed.

Because they tend to focus on methodology rather than results, descriptive abstracts are used most often in the sciences and social sciences.[2]

On the job, you might prepare informative abstracts for a boss who needs the information but who has no time to read the original. Or you might write descriptive abstracts to accompany a bibliography of works you are recommending to colleagues or clients (an annotated bibliography).

The Executive Abstract

A special type of informative abstract, the *executive abstract* (or "executive summary") essentially "replaces" the entire report. Aimed at decision makers rather than technical audiences, an executive abstract generally has more of a persuasive emphasis: to convince readers to act on the information. Executive abstracts are crucial in cases when readers have no time to read the entire original document and when they expect the writer to help guide their thinking. ("Tell me how to think about this," instead of, "Help me understand this.") Unless the user stipulates a specific format, organize your executive abstract to answer these questions:

- *What did you find?*
- *What does it mean?*
- *What should be done?*

The following executive abstract addresses the problem of falling sales for a leading company in the breakfast cereal industry (Grant 223+).

AN EXECUTIVE ABSTRACT

> **Status Report: Market Share for Goldilocks Breakfast Cereals, Inc. (GBC)**

In response to a request from GBC's Board of Directors, the accounting division analyzed recent trends in the company's sales volume and profitability.

FINDINGS

- Even though GBC is the cereal industry leader, its sales for the past four years increased at a mere average of 2.5 percent annually, to $5.2 billion, and net income decreased 12 percent overall, to $459 million.
- This weak sales growth apparently results from consumer resistance to retail price increases for cereal, totaling 91 percent in slightly more than a decade, the highest increase of any processed-food product.
- GBC traditionally offers discount coupons to offset price increases, but consumers seem to prefer a lower everyday price.
- GBC introduces an average of two new cereal products annually (most recently, "Coconut Whammos" and "Spinach Crunchies"), but such innovations do little to increase consumer interest.
- A growing array of generic cereal brands have been underselling GBC's products by more than $1 per box, especially in giant retail outlets.
- This past June, GBC dropped its cereal prices by roughly 20 percent, but by this time, the brand had lost substantial market share to generic cereal brands.

CONCLUSIONS

- Slow but progressive loss of market share threatens GBC's dominance as industry leader.
- GBC must regain consumer loyalty to reinvigorate its market base.
- Not only have discount coupon promotions proven ineffective, but the manufacturer's cost for such promotions can total as much as 20 percent of sales revenue.
- New cereal products have done more to erode than to enhance GBC's brand image.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To regain lost market share and ensure continued dominance, GBC should implement the following recommendations:

1. Eliminate coupon promotions immediately.
2. Curtail development of new cereal products, and invest in improving the taste and nutritional value of GBC's traditional products.
3. Capitalize on GBC's brand recognition with an advertising campaign to promote GBC's "best-sellers" as an "all-day" food (say, as a healthful snack or lunch or an easy and inexpensive alternative to microwave dinners).
4. Examine the possibility of high-volume sales at discounted prices through giant retail chains.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN SUMMARIZING INFORMATION

Information in a summary format is increasingly attractive to today's readers, who often feel bombarded by more information than they can handle. Consider, for example, the popularity of the *USA Today* newspaper, with its countless news items offered in brief snippets for overtaxed readers. In contrast, the *New York Times* offers lengthy text that is information rich but more time-consuming to digest.

A summary format is especially adaptable to the hypertext-linked design of Web-based documents. Instead of long blocks of text, Web users expect pages with concise modules, or "chunks," of information that stand alone, are easy to scan, and require little or no scrolling. (See Chapter 19 for more on Web page design.) Moreover, magazine Web sites such as *Forbes* or *The Economist* offer email summaries of their hard copy editions. And while capsules or "digests" of information are an efficient way to stay abreast of new developments, the abbreviated presentation carries potential pitfalls, as media critic Ilan Greenberg points out (650):

- A condensed version of a complicated issue or event may provide a useful overview, but this superficial treatment can rarely communicate the issue's full complexity—that is, the complete story.
- Whoever summarizes a lengthy piece makes decisions about what to leave out and what to leave in, what to emphasize, and what to ignore. During the selection process, the original message could very well be distorted.
- In a summary of someone else's writing, the tone or "voice" of the original author disappears—along with that writer's way of seeing. In some cases, this can be a form of plagiarism.

A summary's tip-of-the-iceberg view can alter any reader's accurate interpretation of the issue or event, as in the following headlines that summarize the story but distort the facts:

- "Study: Cannabis Makes Drivers More Cautious" This headline from the
  August 21, 2000 *Ottawa Citizen* is accompanied by the following summary on page A1: "Driving while high is less dangerous than while fatigued or drunk." Unless they turn to page A2, readers never encounter the essential fact that "Experts agree that driving while high is not as safe as driving while sober."

- "Chocolate: The New Heart-Healthy Food" Various forms of this claim have made headlines, as, for example, in the March 18, 2000 *Science News:* "Chocolate Hearts: Yummy and Good Medicine?" While the main ingredient in chocolate (cocoa) is rich in antioxidants that prevent arterial plaque buildup, most chocolate treats also contain high concentrations of sugar, caffeine, and cholesterol-laden butter fat or tropical oils (palm or coconut)—thus offsetting any apparent health benefits.

Informed decisions about countless science and technological controversies (human cloning, bioengineered foods, global warming, estrogen therapy) require an informed public. And while summaries do have their place in our busy world, scanning headlines or abstracts is no substitute for detailed reading and careful weighing of the facts. The more complex the topic, the more readers need the whole story.

EXERCISES

1. Read each of these two paragraphs, and then list the significant ideas comprising each essential message. Write a summary of each paragraph.

   In recent years, ski-binding manufacturers, in line with consumer demand, have redesigned their bindings several times in an effort to achieve a noncompromising synthesis between performance and safety. Such a synthesis depends on what appear to be divergent goals. Performance, in essence, is a function of the binding's ability to hold the boot firmly to the ski, thus enabling the skier to rapidly change the position of his or her skis without being hampered by a loose or wobbling connection. Safety, on the other hand, is a function of the binding's ability both to release the boot when the skier falls, and to retain the boot when subjected to the normal shocks of skiing. If achieved, this synthesis of performance and safety will greatly increase skiing pleasure while decreasing accidents.

   Contrary to public belief, sewage treatment plants do not fully purify sewage. The product that leaves the plant to be dumped into the leaching (sievelike drainage) fields is secondary sewage containing toxic contaminants such as phosphates, nitrates, chloride, and heavy metals. As the secondary sewage filters into the ground, this conglomeration is carried along. Under the leaching area develops a contaminated mound through which groundwater flows, spreading the waste products over great distances. If this leachate reaches the outer limits of a well's drawing radius, the water supply becomes polluted. And because all water flows essentially toward the sea, more pollution is added to the coastal regions by this secondary sewage.

2. Attend a campus lecture and take notes on the significant points. Write a summary of the lecture's essential message.
3. Find an article about your major field or area of interest and write both an informative abstract and a descriptive abstract of the article.
4. Select a long paper you have written for one of your courses; write an informative abstract and a descriptive abstract of the paper.
5. After reading the article in Figure 11.2 prepare a descriptive abstract and an informative abstract, using the guidelines on page 199. Identify a specific audience and use for your material.

A possible scenario: You are assistant communications manager for a leading software development company. Part of your job involves publishing a monthly newsletter for employees. After coming across this article, you decide to summarize it for the upcoming issue. (Aspirin is a popular item in this company, given the headaches, stiff necks, and other medical problems that often result from prolonged computer work.) You have 350–375 words of newsletter space to fill. Consider carefully what this audience does and doesn't need. In this situation, what information is most important?

Bring your abstracts to class and exchange them with a classmate for editing according to the revision checklist. Revise your edited copies before submitting them to your instructor.

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

1. Organize into small groups and choose a topic for discussion: an employment problem, a campus problem, plans for an event, suggestions for energy conservation, or the like. (A possible topic: Should employers have the right to require lie detector tests, drug tests, or AIDS tests for their employees?)

   Discuss the topic for one class period, taking notes on significant points and conclusions. Afterward, organize and edit your notes in line with the directions for writing summaries. Next, write a summary of the group discussion in no more than 200 words. Finally, as a group, compare your individual summaries for accuracy, emphasis, conciseness, and clarity.
2. In class, form teams of students who have similar majors or interests. As a team, decide on a related topic that is currently in the news. Appoint a manager who will assign each team member a specific task. Using a combination of Web-based and hard copy versions of news coverage, compare summarized versions with more detailed coverage. For example:

   - a *USA Today* hard copy version versus one from the *New York Times*
   - a headline summary from the *New York Times'* "Quick News" and "Page One Plus" links <www.nytimes.com> versus the full-text hard copy version
   - summarized Web versions from *Forbes* <www.forbes.com> or *The Economist* <www. economist.com> versus the whole story in hard copy
   - a summarized cover story from "The Daily News Info" link on *Newsweek's* Web site <www. newsweek.com> versus the entire story in hard copy

   (Ask your reference librarian for additional suggestions.)

   Each team member should compare the benefits and drawbacks of the story's shorter and longer versions, making a copy of each. Are there instances in which a summary version simply is ethically inadequate as a sole source of information? (Consult the Checklist for Ethical Communication, page 90.) Using your sample documents, explain and illustrate.

   As a full team, assemble and discuss the collected findings, and appoint one member to present the findings to the class in a 15-minute oral report, showing overhead transparencies (pages 662, 665) of selected documents on the overhead projector.

SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT

Obtain a copy of the Annual Report or other public document describing the activities and mission of the agency for which you are working. Write an informative abstract of the report for a general, public audience.

Learn about summaries and hierarchies of power at
<www.ablongman.com/
lannonweb>
The original passage
A summarized version

GUIDELINES for Summarizing Information

1. *Be considerate of later readers.* Unless you own the book, journal, or magazine, work from a photocopy.
2. *Read the entire original.* When summarizing someone else's work, get a complete picture before writing a word.
3. *Reread and underline.* Identify the issue or need that led to the article or report. Focus on the essential message: thesis and topic sentences, findings, conclusions, and recommendations.
4. *Pare down your underlined material.* Omit technical details, examples, explanations, or any background that readers won't need in order to understand the original's main idea. In summarizing another's work, avoid quotations; if you must quote a crucial word or phrase directly, use quotation marks.
5. *Rewrite in your own words.* Include all essential material in the first draft; even if it is too long, you can trim later. Be sure to add no personal comments to the original, except for a brief, clarifying definition, if needed.
6. *Edit for conciseness.* When you have everything readers need, trim the word count (page 253).
   a. Cross out needless words—without harming clarity or grammar. Use complete sentences:

      ~~As far as~~ artificial intelligence ~~is concerned, the~~ technology is ~~only~~ in its infancy.

   b. Cross out needless prefaces:

      The writer argues . . . .
      Also discussed is . . . .

   c. Combine related ideas (page 261) and rephrase to emphasize relationships:

      A recent study emphasized job opportunities in the computer field. Fewer of tomorrow's jobs will be for programmers and other people who know how to create technology. More jobs will be for people who can use technology—as in marketing and finance (P. Ross, "Enjoy" 206).

      Compare this connected and more concise version:

      A recent study predicts fewer jobs for programmers and other creators of technology, and more jobs for users of technology—as in marketing and finance (P. Ross, "Enjoy" 206).

   d. Use numerals for numbers, except to begin a sentence.
7. *Check your version against the original.* Verify that you have preserved the essential message. Add no personal comments—unless you are preparing an executive abstract (page 208).
8. *Rewrite your edited version.* In this final version, strive for readability and conciseness. Add transitional expressions (page 772) to reinforce the connection between related ideas. Respect any stipulated word limit.

9. *Document your source.* Cite the full source below any summary not accompanied by its original (Appendix A).

Needless words omitted
Needless prefaces omitted
Disconnected and rambling
(continues)
Guidelines (continued)
Connected and concise
Elements of a usable summary
Combine as orienting statement (controlling idea)
Omit background details
Include causes of problem
Include major cause
Omit nonvital details
Include key comparison
Omit speculation
Include key facts
Include key facts and comparisons
Include key fact
Omit nonvital details
Omit visual
Source: U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration.
Include key claim
Omit explanation
Include key fact
Omit nonvital fact
Include key fact
Include key facts
Omit examples
Include key claims
Include key fact
Include striking exception
Omit long explanation
Omit speculation
Include key issue
Omit explanation
Include key claim
Omit nonvital details
Include key claim
Omit long explanation
Include key claims
Omit explanation
Include key fact
Omit nonvital details
Include key fact
Include striking cost figure
Omit speculation

11.2
Learn more about summaries in online documentation at <www.ablongman.com/lannonweb>

[1]Adapted from David Vaughan. Although I take liberties with his classification, Vaughan helped clarify my thinking about the overlapping terminology that blurs these distinctions.

FIGURE 11.1 Summarized Information Assumes Various Forms

The importance of summaries

"Every time I run a training session in corporate communication, participants tell horror stories about working weeks or months on a report, only to have it disappear somewhere up the management chain. We use copies of those "invisible" reports as case studies, and invariably, the summary turns out to have been poorly written, providing readers few or no clues as to the report's significance. I'll bet companies lose millions because new ideas and recommendations get relegated to that stockpile of reports unread yearly in corporate America."

—Frank Sousa, communications consultant

JOB...

JOB...

ON THE

[2]My thanks to Daryl Davis for this clarifying distinction.

Users of an executive abstract have these questions

''What did you find?"

''What does it mean?"

''What should be done?"

11.3

For more on the ethics of summaries visit <www.ablongman.com/lannonweb>

Ways in which summarized information can be unethical

Summaries that fail to capture the real story

11.4

For more on usability testing visit <www.ablongman.com/lannonweb>

CHECKLIST for Usability of Summaries

Use this checklist to refine your summaries. (Page numbers in parentheses refer to first page of discussion.)

Content

- Does the summary contain only the essential message? (198)
- Does the summary make sense as an independent piece? (200)
- Is the summary accurate when checked against the original? (200)
- Is the summary free of any additions to the original? (199)
- Is the summary free of needless details? (199)
- Is the summary economical yet clear and comprehensive? (200)

- Is the source documented? (200)
- Does the descriptive abstract tell what the original is about? (208)

Organization

- Is the summary coherent? (233)
- Are there enough transitions to reveal the line of thought? (234)

Style

- Is the summary's level of technicality appropriate for its audience? (200)
- Is the summary free of needless words? (199)
- Are all sentences clear, concise, and fluent? (244)
- Is the summary written in correct English? (Appendix C)

For more exercises, visit
<www.ablongman.com/lannon>

FIGURE 11.2 An Article To Be Summarized

Source: Excerpt from FDA Consumer *Jan./Feb. 1994: 19–21.*