What is a Summary? What is an Analysis?

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A summary answers the question, "what is this text about?" It is important to have an answer to this question, of course, but that's where your work begins, not ends.

In your academic writing, you should be in conversation with the author, not just demonstrating that you understand the work that she's already done. An analysis sets forth an *argument* that you will support using textual evidence. Another useful way to think about analysis is that it puts you in *active dialogue* with the text – you are no longer just a *passive consumer* of its meaning.

Here are some useful questions to ask yourself:

- Am I stating something that would be obvious to any careful reader?
- Does my essay move through the plot, history, or author's argument in the same order the author used?
- Am I simply describing *what* happens, *where* it happens, or to *whom* it happens?

A "yes" to any of these questions may be a sign that you are **summarizing**.

Now ask yourself these questions:

- Am I making an original argument about the text?
- Have I arranged my evidence around my own points, rather than just following the author's or plot's order?
- Am I explaining *why* or *how* an aspect of the text is significant?
- Could another reader make a different argument about the text than the one I am making?

A "yes" to any of these may be a sign that you are **analyzing**.

Keep an eye out for these phrases, which usually signal summary rather than analysis:
"[This text] is about..."
"[This author] writes about..."
"[This author] describes..."

Practicing *active reading* will help you read the text closely, and make analysis easier. Annotate the text as you read: underline words or phrases that seem important, confusing, or that you will need to define using a dictionary.

When you begin a response to an essay prompt, you should keep the following writing strategies in mind:

- Read the question carefully, twice! Understanding the question and its implications is crucial to formulating a strong analysis.
- Imagine yourself in conversation with the author and with your instructor. Ask yourself: what issues does this prompt ask me to consider? What does the author argue, suggest, or imply about these issues? Finally, what is my original argument? You must support your argument using evidence from the author's text. This argument is your thesis.
- After you write, read through your paragraphs. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence. Does each topic sentence directly support your thesis statement?
- Are there any passages you could delete from your paper, without negatively affecting your argument? These passages *might* be summary or personal narrative.