

Writing Center

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Writing a Plot Summary

Prewriting

1. Read your selected story carefully twice. On the first reading, try to obtain an overall sense of what happens in the story. On the second reading, concentrate on identifying the protagonist, the antagonist, and the key incidents of the plot.
2. After you have read the story twice, answer the following questions as part of your prewriting:

Who is the protagonist?

Who or what is/are the antagonist(s)?

Where in the story is the point of conflict introduced?

Which incidents/events complicate the conflict?

What is the climax of the story?

When you have completed the steps above, combine the responses into a well-written one, or two paragraph summary.

Drafting

The summary follows the structure of a process essay; it describes the steps through which a story's conflict is resolved. It names and identifies important characters and describes the major events of the story. It does not explain the events or interprets them in any way; the plot summary merely describes what happens. The writer of the plot summary does not need to use quotes from the story, but they can be used if one feels they are necessary.

To give the plot summary a focus, a thesis statement summarizes the series of events. If more than one paragraph is written, write a topic sentence for each paragraph that conveys the main ideas. Neither a conclusion nor an introduction is required as in a standard essay.

Some stories reveal their plot lines through flashbacks. A draft summary can be used to reorganize the events in the chronological order in which they took place. Be sure to examine the sentence structure as you near the draft. Summary drafts should eliminate choppy sentences by combining them or by making one subordinate to another. Transitions between ideas and paragraphs should indicate time order as a series of events. Here are some examples of transitions.

In the beginning
Initially
As the story begins

Subsequently
Suddenly
At last

First
In the meantime
Meanwhile

Later
During
Ultimately

Final Draft and Polished Plot Summary

Word-Process the polished plot summary. Title the plot summary as in the following example:

Summary of Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

O'Connor begins this family vacation but ends with a nightmarish series of incidents. Initially, the protagonist grandmother and her son Bailey along with his wife and the three children pile into Bailey's car for a typical summer trip from Georgia to Florida. As they begin the drive, the grandmother reveals her irritating qualities, reminiscing about the lost glories of the Old South, and enjoying her superior status as a "lady" before selfishly sneaking her pet cat into the car. When the family stops at Red Sammy's Barbeque, the grandmother again regrets the loss of the "good old days" and the loss of "good men" as she complains to Sammy. Back on the road, the grandmother misdirects the family to a dirt road and, ultimately, she and her cat cause an accident.

When the grandmother flags down another traveler and identifies him as "The Misfit", an escaped convict mentioned back at the barbeque restaurant, she meets her main antagonist and due to her indiscreet tongue invites tragedy: one by one the family members are escorted into the woods by The Misfit's henchmen and are shot dead. Meanwhile, the grandmother tries various tactics to save her own life. She flatters The Misfit; she tries to bribe him, and tries to appeal to his religious convictions. At last the grandmother's indiscretion hits a raw nerve in The Misfit: in a moment of misunderstanding, she "touches" her antagonist by calling him one of her "babies." The Misfit recoils from this sudden epiphany, shooting the grandmother. The three escaped convicts move on leaving the elderly woman with her eyes open in death, peering at the cloudless sky.