From Paraphrase to Summary to Analysis

The distinction between paraphrase, summary, and analysis is central to academic writing, especially to assignments which require critical responses to sources. They are important at different stages in the writing process, moving from paraphrase, to summary, to analysis.

1. **Paraphrase** in order to understand the explicit content of a source by putting it in your own words.
2. **Summarize** by pulling out the main points in the paraphrase, reducing the content of the source to its essential components.
3. **Analyze** by expressing your own observations and ideas to show how the components function as a whole (the source itself, the subject of the source, the audience of the source, the discipline the source contributes to, etc.).

The following example uses Henry David Thoreau’s line “Still, we live meanly, like ants,” to illustrate the differences between paraphrase, summary, and analysis.

**Paraphrase:** Despite our level of knowledge, civilization, and apparent evolution, we continue to live ignoble lives. We scurry about mindlessly, thinking only of providing ourselves with the material necessities of life, without a thought for our intellectual or spiritual well-being.

In order to paraphrase, it’s best to read the text, put it away, and then try to write what it said in your own words. It may be shorter or longer than the original text.

**Summary:** Thoreau expresses irritated dismay over our failure to rise above material concerns.

The summary is shorter, extracting the most important aspects: Thoreau’s irritation and humans’ failure to rise above material concerns.

**Analysis:** Thoreau's remark conveys, despite its brevity, a thorough and specific diagnosis of human stagnation. The simile “like ants” indicts human beings for their misdirected energy: they scurry about mindless, bent only on providing the material necessities of life, paying no attention to their spiritual or intellectual natures. The use of "still" expresses continuity in time, thus demonstrating the writer’s frustration over continued adherence to meaningless activity and his sense that human beings ought to know better. This frustration is further evoked by the simile "like ants,” which compares people to the one creature in the world which they should be most unlike evolutionarily. By collapsing the evolutionary poles, Thoreau suggests our supposed progress is a myth. The irritation expressed in "still," combined with the implicit insult of the simile, is a sweeping attack on human unconsciousness. However, by using "we" instead of "you" or "they," Thoreau assumes membership in the group he attacks, and thus indicates that his goal in the essay is to challenge human complacency, including his own, by calling into question our habitual patterns of behavior and our conventional notions of value.

The analysis is longer and focuses on all the relevant details, revealing ideas that were not explicitly stated in the original source. In the context of an essay, the analysis ties the source into the overall argument of the paper.