



## Tips for Reading Summa Articles

### What is a Summa Article?

To know a Summa article, you must know something about Thomas Aquinas. He was a fourteenth century Italian young nobleman who was actually related to the Emperor! His family hopes for a rich and powerful destiny for him – instead, he felt God's call and ran away to become a Dominican friar. His family was horrified! It was as though a prince had run away to become a beggar! His older brothers kidnapped him and locked him in a tower for a year, trying everything they could to change his mind. At one point they even tried to beat him up. But Thomas was strong and new how to defend himself – his brothers both left his tower room with black eyes. His sisters, however, were sympathetic to Thomas, and one night they helped him escape.

Thomas had a naturally brilliant mind, and the time he spent studying during his captivity refined it to an even keener edge. He studied under the philosopher and scientist priest, Albert the Great. Because he spoke slowly and was in general very quiet, his classmates assumed he was stupid and nicknamed him “The Dumb Ox.” One day Albert heard him calling him by that name, and he cried out, “You may call him a dumb ox, but I tell you that one day this ox's bellowing will be heard all over Europe!” Albert proved right. Thomas was not only a great intellect, but an excellent writer and preacher. He moved the hearts of many since he was able to discourse so well using both faith and reason.

Thomas decided to write a volume called “The Summary of Theology,” a series of articles that would serve as a guide to seekers in the Faith to understand what we believe about God. He wanted not only to state articles of faith, but to defend them. As a result, he would start each article by asking a question about whether or not something to do with the Faith was so. He would then say that it seemed as though the article of faith wasn't true. Then he would show the reasons and objections that people might make about why the article of faith was untrue. Then he would give his reasons why it actually was true in spite of the objections, using evidence from the Bible, from logic, from evidence, and from wise sayings from those who had gone before. Then he would address each of the objections from before, and show how they were untrue, mistaken, or did not apply to the situation.

## Are Summa Articles Helpful For Students Learning the Craft of Essay Writing

Yes! Summa articles can be a great way to brainstorm and organize your thoughts, figuring out what you actually think about a topic.

Many beginning writers come up with great theses, but then end up writing lots of words that do not necessarily work to directly back up their thesis. They might relate to the topics, but don't help prove the thesis. A Summa Article is basically a list of what you think, why you think it, ways someone might try to disprove your thesis, and answers you might have for that person to show you're right after all. In other words, *it's a great litmus test to see whether the ideas you are brainstorming for your essay actually make a strong argument, or are just a lot of words! They also help you see clearly how the different ideas you are writing about relate to the main idea, and to note any holes in your logic.*

### Why Did Thomas Set The Summa Articles Up This Way?

Thomas realized that in order to help people understand the truth, it was not enough to simply state his opinions – he had to show that they stood up to counter arguments. He would pick the very best arguments against his position he could think of, and start with them in order to show respect for those who disagreed with them and make his own argument stronger when he toppled them.

He then stated his position and the evidence for it, because starting to address the objections right away would mean he was answering them without actually giving the background for his own position. It wouldn't make much sense otherwise.

He would finish with answers to the objections in order to resolve the questions raised in the reader's mind at the beginning of the article. It's often fun to try to come up with your own answers to the objections before you see the way Thomas handled them.

Here's a diagram of a made-up Summa article:

Whether this particular thing is so.

It would seem that this particular thing is not so.

Objection 1: Here is an excellent reason why it is not so.

Objection 2: And here's another!

Objection 3: And... another! Ha! Ha! Ha!

On the contrary, in the First Book of Samuel, it says, *“These things are true, and worthy of belief.”*

I answer that it is true, true, true! Here are my reasons for thinking so!

Reply to Objection 1: Your excellent reason doesn't hold up when we examine it more closely, and here's why.

Reply to Objection 2: And this one doesn't hold up much better, does it?

Reply to Objection 3: See, it's all true!

### **Is There More Than One Way to Read a Summa Article?**

Yes! Some people find that they prefer to read Thomas's position (the “On the contrary” and “I answer that” sections) first, so that they know what his position is right away, and then read each objection and its reply one by one – they follow this pattern:

On the contrary

I answer that

Objection 1

Reply to Objection 1

Objection 2

Reply to Objection 2

Objection 3

Reply to Objection 3

As you can see this method requires some skipping around, but many people prefer it. It is up to you to read it the way you would like.

### **What Do I Do If I Don't Always Get What Thomas's Point Is?**

Don't be anxious – in the first place, Summa articles are usually really short – it doesn't take much time to reread the paragraph where you're stuck. Reread it a couple of times, and think about what he might say – half the time it comes unstuck!