A note on summarizing your sources

In 1-2 paragraphs, briefly summarize the source in your own words and explain what information from the source will be used by your group for the project.

You’ve all seen and done summaries before—usually in the form of an Abstract or Executive Summary for an article or report. You know that summaries are about creating a brief, but comprehensive, version of a longer document. Abstracts, in academic articles, for example, are often used by readers to decide if the procedures and results are relevant to their own work; Executive Summaries, in consulting reports, highlight the bottom line—usually a recommendation—along with relevant details on context and analysis of a particular problem. These documents are meant to stand on their own, and make sense to a reader without further reading.

What you’re being asked to do here is to summarize each of your three sources. But it’s not about summarizing everything that’s in the source—it’s about targeting what you’re going to use for THIS specific project. And that means that the same source material will be summarized in different ways by different team members—and, indeed, by different teams depending on how you are using a particular source and what information from the source is of relevance to your topic.

In your 1 – 2 paragraphs:
- Include one or two sentences that give a high-level overview of the source—what it’s about. Keep this short.
- Use the rest of the summary to go into more detail about the part(s) you’ll be using and how/why you think this information will help your team in doing the project.

In a few sentences, discuss how the source is sufficiently reliable and authoritative for this project. This includes discussing any potential bias.

Once you’ve summarized the key information for your project from the source, you can evaluate it for reliability and authority, as well as bias. Here, you can use questions from the CRAAP test to analyze your source. Remember, though, that you’re not being asked to answer every single question on the CRAAP test handout; rather, you’re going to target the most relevant ones.

For example, if I was looking to choose a particular type of coffee maker, I’d probably get a lot of information from manufacturers’ web sites; provided these are reputable companies, the information/specifications will be accurate. However, they’re not going to give me the complete picture. Will a manufacturer address limitations in their design? Will they evaluate alternatives? Likely not—and that’s their bias; it doesn’t mean they’re deliberately withholding information—it means they’re only using evidence that supports their claims. As a result, while they will give me reliable and authoritative information, that information is only part of the bigger picture in terms of what I need to know. Identifying the gaps that bias might create will also help me see where I need to go next in my research.