Summarizing Another's Argument

A decent summary is a tough nut to crack, especially when you must radically distill a lengthy and complex argument down to its essence. To make things yet more messy, we should remember that there are many ways to create good summaries of the same argument. Writers will likely notice slightly different aspects of an argument, and may paraphrase its central claim in a variety of ways, each of them accurate. The most important goal to keep in mind is that a summary should represent another writer's thinking in a non-tendentious way. Save your concerns and qualms for later. Your goal is to show that you're capable of fashioning a fair and generous representation of another's perspective, point of view, and reasoning. To insure that you are casting a fair representation of another's argument, consider this advice.

best verbs
Choosing appropriate verbs can help you accurately reflect another's approach to her argument. If you have a lexicon of verbs at hand, you are likely to make smart choices. Think about this range of intellectual actions:

asserts	examines	reveals
adds to	extends	revisits
acknowledges	enriches	reminds
avers	finds	redefines
bolsters	formulates	redescribes
claims	insists	responds
contends	inquires into	situates
concludes	limits	stabilizes
describes	maintains	supports
differentiates	opens	welcomes
distinguishes	prioritizes	warns
discovers	proclaims	
defines	questions	
details	qualifies	

context
You cannot completely avoid quoting out of context because you obviously cannot quote all of an original. But if you read carefully, and re-read everything that's crucial to your own response, your summary will be made within the context that matters most, *the context of your own grasp of the original*.

NOT: "Bartolli contends that the war was caused by Z."
NOT: "Bartolli contends that the war was caused by X, Y, and Z."
BUT: "Bartolli contends that the war was caused by X, Y, and Z. But she locates Z as the most important
      cause for three reasons: Reason 1, Reason 2, and Reason 3."

relative importance of a claim
When you represent the claims made by your source, consider noting the relative importance of that claim: Is it a main point? a minor point of support? a qualification or concession? a framing suggestion not a part of the main argument? Avoid this kind of mistake:

<u>Original by Jones</u>
"We cannot conclude that one event causes another just because the second follows the first. And statistical correlation can never prove causation. But nobody who has studied the data doubts that smoking is a causal factor in lung cancer."

<u>Misleading Representation of Jones</u>
"Jones makes the point that 'we cannot conclude that one event causes another just because the second follows the first. And statistical correlation can never prove causation.' No wonder responsible researchers distrust statistical evidence of health risks."

> *Jones did not make this point at all. He merely* conceded *a point that he stated was relatively trivial as compared to what he said in the final sentence, which is the point he really wanted to make.*

scope and level of certainty
Be sure about the scope of application and level of confidence an author expresses in making a claim. There are not the same:

X seems often to cause Y.
X causes Y.

We can define X as Y provided that we are speaking only about the nineteenth century.
We can define X as Y.