

SUMMARIZE A REAL PDF USING STRUCTURED PROMPTS

30–45 MIN

Objective. Use the five-part formula to turn a long document into a usable summary, action items, and discussion questions.

CONCEPTS TO KEEP IN MIND

- **A prompt is a specification**, not a conversation. The clearer the spec, the more useful the output.
- **Five parts:** Context · Specific Details · Intent · Desired Format · Constraints. You don't need all five every time, but missing parts are where quality breaks.
- **Source quality matters.** AI summarizes what you give it. A mediocre PDF produces a mediocre summary. Pick a document worth your time.
- **Verify the summary against the source.** AI will confidently misremember. Spot-check 2–3 claims before you trust it.

SCENARIO

You have a document on your desk you've been meaning to read — a white paper, a long article, a chapter, a report. You want the *useful* parts: what it actually says, what to do about it, what's worth discussing with a colleague. Reading it cover to cover takes an hour you don't have.

Today you'll spec a prompt that gets you all three in one shot.

SOURCE MATERIAL

Pick **one** real document you actually want to digest. Good candidates:

- A whitepaper or industry report (10–30 pages)
- A book chapter or long-form article
- A research paper in your field
- A long internal memo or strategy doc

Avoid: novels, anything you've already read closely, marketing fluff. The goal is a real signal-to-noise win.

PROMPTS TO TRY

Starter prompt — copy, fill in the bracketed parts, run it with your PDF attached:

[Context]

You are helping me digest a long document I don't have time to read in full. I work as a [your role] and I'll be using this summary to [your goal – e.g., prep for a meeting, decide whether to read the full thing, brief a colleague].

[Specific Details]

The document is attached. It is a [whitepaper / chapter / report / article] on [topic]. Length is roughly [X] pages.

[Intent]

Produce three things from this document:

1. A useful summary I can read in two minutes.
2. Three concrete action items a person in my role could take based on it.
3. Five discussion questions I could bring to a colleague or team.

[Desired Format]

- Summary: 5–8 bullet points, each one sentence, in the document's order.
- Action items: numbered list, one sentence each, framed as verbs ("Audit X", "Schedule Y").
- Discussion questions: numbered list, open-ended (no yes/no questions).

[Constraints]

- No filler ("This document discusses...", "In conclusion..."). Get to the point.
- If the document contradicts itself, flag it; don't smooth it over.
- If you're unsure of a claim, mark it [unverified] rather than asserting it.
- Use the document's own terminology where possible.

Follow-up prompts if the first pass needs work:

The summary is too high-level. Rewrite it with the three specific numbers, figures, or dates that matter most from the document.

Two of the action items feel generic. Rewrite them so they only make sense if you actually read this specific document.

For each discussion question, add the section of the document it draws from.

DELIVERABLE

A short note (text file, doc, wherever you keep things) containing:

1. The document's title + a 5–8 bullet summary
2. Three action items, framed as verbs
3. Five discussion questions
4. One sentence: did the AI get anything wrong that you caught when verifying?

SIGNS OF SUCCESS

- You can read the summary faster than you'd skim the original — and still get the substance.
- The action items make sense to *someone in your role* but wouldn't make sense to a stranger. Specificity is the tell.
- At least one discussion question is something you'd actually want to ask.
- You caught at least one thing AI got slightly off when you verified — good practice, that's the muscle.
- You'd run this prompt again on the next long document instead of reading it cover-to-cover blind.

Deliverable. *A one-page summary, three action items, and five discussion questions — generated from a real PDF using a single structured prompt.*