

The Rhetorical Précis

Woodworth, Margaret K. (1988). The rhetorical précis. *Rhetoric Review*, 7.1, 156-164.

In a four sentence format, the rhetorical précis offers a short account of an article, essay, or resource that does more than summarize its content.

When you write a précis, your goals are to do the following:

- Understand and relate the complete argument of the text
- Maintain clarity and brevity
- Avoid repeating
- Avoid your personal interpretation of a work

The four sentences of the précis:

1. Name of author, [optional: a phrase describing author], genre and title of work, date in parentheses; a rhetorically accurate verb (such as “assert,” “argue,” “suggest,” “imply,” “claim,” etc.); and a THAT clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) of the work.
2. An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis, usually in chronological order.
3. A statement of the author’s apparent purpose, followed by an “in order” phrase indicating the change the author wants to effect in the audience.
4. A description of the intended audience and the relationship the author established with the audience.

SAMPLE

Charles S. Peirce's¹ article, “The Fixation of Belief” (1877),² asserts that³ humans have psychological and social mechanisms designed to protect and cement (or “fix”) our beliefs.⁴ Peirce backs this claim up with descriptions of four methods of fixing belief, pointing out the effectiveness and potential weaknesses of each method.⁵ Peirce’s purpose is to point out the ways that people commonly establish their belief systems⁶ in order to⁷ jolt the awareness of the reader into considering how their own belief system may be the product of such methods and to consider what Peirce calls “the method of science” as a progressive alternative to the other three.⁸ Given the technical language used in the article, Peirce is writing to a well-educated audience with some knowledge of philosophy and history and a willingness to consider other ways of thinking.⁹

¹ Author

Start with the author's name and be sure to give it in full. It is optional to provide a phrase describing the author such as “Arthur Schopenhauer, a 19th century German philosopher...” This describing phrase is optional because the Précis really focuses on the content of the work. Where the background details are relevant to summarizing the content, then you should include it.

² Genre & Title & Date

Provide the title in full and the date of its publication. Recognize that different genres of work use different conventions for listing. Essays and journal articles are usually listed in "quotes". Books are generally *italicized*.

³ That

This common pronoun does a crucial job in the Précis. To remain grammatically sound, we must include the subject (the work and its author), a predicate (your claim about that work). These must be linked by a rhetorically appropriate verb. "Rhetorically appropriate" here means that it expresses the action of the author in the work.

subject (the work and its author and date) **verb that predicate** (your claim about that work)

⁴ Thesis

The thesis, or major claim, of the work is statement of the overall and final point that it aims at. Note that this claim may never be stated by the author. You may have to interpret and synthesize to draw out a thesis. The thesis statement you attribute to a work is your concise summary of what you understood the author's point to be.

⁵ Explanation

This sentence explains how the thesis, presented in the previous sentence, is developed by the author. The author may give several arguments for a single thesis. Or the author may give a chain of arguments leading up to the thesis. The author may define key concepts related to the thesis. Your job in reading intellectual literature is to identify how the main claim is produced by the work. We take it as a basic standard here that sophisticated literature does not merely make claims, it provides support for them.

⁶ Purpose

A statement of the author's purpose in writing this work. What is the writer trying to accomplish here? This statement of purpose is connected to the audience effect by the *in order to* phrase. *Author's purpose in order to effect on the reader*

⁷ *In order to* = key phrase of the précis. It directly indicates the effect the author intends to have upon the audience. To produce this sentence, think about what change will occur in the reader if the author is successful. Authors may write with the purpose to persuade, to refute, to change, even to frighten, anger, or confuse. Determine what you think the author's purpose is and what that purpose is supposed to do to the reader. Note that the purpose may or may not be successful (i.e. it may not have the intended effect).

⁸ Effect

A statement of the author's intended effect on the reader. This statement of purpose is connected to the audience effect by the *in order to* phrase. Every author writes to have some effect on the audience (readers). It may be to make the audience laugh, to cause the audience to question their own beliefs, to persuade them to a point of view, to challenge a belief they are likely to have, etc. This effect is not a report of how the work affects *you*, but of what you think the author's intended effect is.

⁹ Audience

A statement of the author's intended audience and the relationship the author establishes with the audience. The language of a work selects a certain audience and excludes others. Examine the language and references of the work to judge what sort of pre-knowledge the author assumes of the reader.