

# WRITING THE PRÉCIS (PRONOUNCED PRAY-SEE)

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## DEFINITION:

The précis is a highly structured four sentence paragraph (for most of our purposes, we use four: at times, we may extend this into an actual paper) that records the essential elements of a unit of spoken or written discourse, including the name of the speaker/writer, the context of the delivery, the major assertion, the mode of development and/or support, the stated and/or apparent purpose, and the relationship established between the speaker/writer and the audience (the last element is intended to identify the tone of the work). Each of the four sentences requires specific information; students are also encouraged to integrate brief quotations to convey the author's sense of style and tone.

## FORMAT:

*Each number represents one of the four sentences in the précis.*

1. Name of author [optional: a phrase describing author], genre and title of work [date and additional publishing information in parenthesis]; a rhetorically accurate verb (such as "asserts," "argues," "suggests," "implies," "claims," etc.); and a THAT clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) of the work. (**WHAT**)
2. An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis (for instance, comparing and contrasting, narrating, illustrating, defining, using humor or sarcasm, relating personal experience, using examples, etc.), usually in chronological order – always identifying the rhetorical mode(s) employed. (**HOW**)
3. A statement of the author's apparent purpose followed by an IN ORDER TO phrase in which you explain what the author wants the audience to do or feel as a result of reading the work. (**WHY**)
4. A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience and the tone the author uses. (**TO WHOM**)

## FURTHER DETAILS AND EXPLANATION OF PURPOSE:

The **first sentence** is probably the most difficult. Students should be careful to employ a rhetorically accurate verb followed by a THAT clause, avoiding the use of more general words such as "writes" and "states." The THAT clause is designed to demand a complete statement: a grammatical subject (the topic of the essay) and predicate (the claim that is made about that topic). If the THAT clause is not employed, students will end up allowing "about" and "how" to slip out in stating the thesis: i.e., "Sheridan Baker writes about attitudes in writing" or "... states how attitudes affect writing" -- neither of which reports what he claims to be true about attitudes.

The **second sentence** is less structured. Sometimes it works best to report the order of development: "The author develops this assertion first, by applying these techniques to two poems; second, by providing definitions; and third, by explaining the history of each approach." A more general statement may also work in the second sentence: "The author develops this idea by comparing and contrasting the lives of these two Civil War heroes." In works of literature, the second sentence may provide a short plot summary: "Hemingway develops this idea through a sparse narrative about the 'initiation' of a young boy who observes in one night both a birth and a death."

The **third sentence** sometimes inadvertently restates the thesis: "The author's purpose is to prove that..." Remember that one's purpose is always to put forward a thesis, but there are others as well. The infinitive "to" phrase should transcend a phrase such as "Her purpose is to inform...." Look beyond such a simplistic response to assess what the author wants the audience to do or to feel as a result of reading the work. This could possibly include a "so what" idea.

In the **fourth sentence**, students need to ask how the language of the work excludes certain audiences (non-specialists would not understand the terminology; children would not understand the irony) in order to see that the author did make certain assumptions about the pre-existing knowledge of the audience. This sentence may also report the author's tone.

\*The preceding was adapted from Dr. Jo Koster and Tracy Hudson's "Rhetorical Précis," a condensation of *Rhetoric Review*.

### **Précis examples**

Précis of bell hooks's "Women Who Write too Much"

bell hooks, in her essay "Women Who Write too Much" from Remembered Rapture (1999), suggests that all dissident writers, particularly black female writers, face enormous time pressures, for if they are not prodigious, they are never noticed by mainstream publishers. She supports her position first by describing her early writing experiences that taught her to "not be afraid of the writing process"; second, by explaining her motives for writing, including "political activism"; and lastly, by affirming her argument, stressing that people must strategically schedule their writing and "make much of that time." Her two-pronged purpose is to respond to critics and to encourage minority writers to develop their own voice. Although at times her writing seems almost didactic, hooks ultimately establishes a companionable relationship with her audience of both critics and women who seek to improve the effectiveness of their own writing.

From Michelle Garbis [http://www.teachnlearn.org/rhetorical\\_precis.htm](http://www.teachnlearn.org/rhetorical_precis.htm)

*Additional Samples:*

Sandra M. Gilbert, professor of English at the University of California, Davis, in her essay "Plain Jane's Progress" (1977), suggests that Charlotte Brontë intended *Jane Eyre* to resemble John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in that Jane's pilgrimage through a series of events based on the enclosure and escape motif eventually lead toward the equality that Brontë herself sought. Gilbert supports this conclusion by using the structure of the novel to highlight the places Jane has been confined, the changes she undergoes during the process of escape, and the individuals and experiences that lead to her maturation concluding that "this marriage of true minds at Ferndean – this is the way" (501). Her purpose is to help readers see the role of women in Victorian England in order to help them understand the uniqueness and daring of Brontë's work. She establishes a formal relationship with her audience of literary scholars interested in feminist criticism who are familiar with the work of Brontë, Bunyan, Lord Byron and others and are intrigued by feminist theory as it relates to Victorian literature.

from <http://www.winthrop.edu/english/core/success/precis.htm>

Toni Morrison, in her essay "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks," implies that racism in the United States has affected the craft and process of American novelists. Morrison supports her implication by describing how Ernest Hemingway writes about black characters in his novels and short stories. Her purpose is to make her readers aware of the cruel reality of racism underlying some of the greatest works of American literature in order to help them examine the far-reaching effects racism has not only on those discriminated against but also on those who discriminate. She establishes a formal and highly analytical tone with her audience of racially mixed (but probably mainly white), theoretically sophisticated readers and critical interpreters of American literature.

from <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~sapinosa/precis.htm>

Sheridan Baker, in his essay "Attitudes" (1966), asserts that writers' attitudes toward their subjects, their audiences, and themselves determine to a large extent the quality of their prose. Baker supports this assertion by showing examples of how inappropriate attitudes can make writing unclear, pompous, or boring, concluding that a good writer "will be respectful toward his audience, considerate toward his readers, and somehow amiable toward human failings" (58). His purpose is to make his readers aware of the dangers of negative attitudes in order to help them become better writers. He establishes an informal relationship with his audience of college students who are interested in learning to write "with conviction" (55).

Woodworth, Margaret K. "The Rhetorical Précis." *Rhetoric Review* 7 (1988): 156-164.

**Other requirements:**

1. You must follow the format illustrated on in this document. No freelancing!
2. You must use correct MLA format.
3. This activity is vital for proving you've read and analyzed the material, as well as demonstrating your understanding of the reading. Also, the précis allows you to engage intellectually and meaningfully in small group and class discussions about specific readings.