

Rhetorical Précis

Q: What is a Rhetorical Précis?

A: A précis is a **four sentence** paragraph that records the essential elements of an essay. Each of the four sentences requires specific information.

Q: How do I write a Rhetorical Précis?

A: Each sentence of the paragraph should contain the following information:

First sentence: 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. *Think of it this way: WHO are you talking about? WHAT is their background? WHAT did they write? WHAT year was it written? WHAT is their point?*

Second sentence: An explanation of the evidence and development the author uses to develop and/or support the thesis, usually in chronological order. *Think of it this way: HOW do they prove their thesis? Do they offer interviews? Official data? Other outside sources? Anecdotes?*

Third sentence: A statement of the author's purpose followed by an "in order" phrase. *Think of it this way: Are they trying to entertain you? Persuade you to feel a certain way or change your mind about an issue? Are they trying to inform you – sharing information that teaches -? WHY is that their purpose? In order to accomplish what?*

Fourth sentence: A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience. *Think of it this way: WHO is the author trying to address? For example, are they talking to teachers? parents? senior citizens? Latinos? Muslims? registered voters? It can be anyone. You need to determine if they are addressed formally (use of academic language, proper English) or informally (more conversational tone, use of slang, etc...).*

Q: Does the précis need to be MLA formatted?

A: Yes, your précis and reading response should be formatted according to MLA rules, including creating a Works Cited page. If you are using this for a journal, you won't need a works cited sheet or your name on each page.

Rhetorical Précis Worksheet

A rhetorical précis differs from a summary in that it is a less neutral, more analytical condensation of both the content and method of the original text. If you think of a summary as primarily a brief representation of what a text says, then you might think of the rhetorical précis as a brief representation of what a text both says and does. Although less common than a summary, a rhetorical précis is a particularly useful way to sum up your understanding of how a text works rhetorically (*Reading Rhetorically*, 62)

The Structure of a Rhetorical Précis

Sentence One: Name of the author, genre, and title of work, date in parentheses; a rhetorically active verb; and a THAT clause containing the major assertion or thesis in the text.

Sentence Two: An explanation of how the author develops and supports the thesis.

Sentence Three: A statement of the author's apparent purpose, followed by an "in order to" phrase.

Sentence Four: A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

Rhetorical Précis Sentence Starters

Sentence One (What?)

_____ in the _____,
(Author) (A) (Title) _____ that

(B)

Sentence Two (How?)

_____ supports his/her _____ by _____ (Author's Last
Name) (B) (C)

Sentence Three (Why?)

The author's purpose is to

_____ (D) _____ in order to / so that

Sentence Four (To Whom?)

The author writes in a _____ tone for _____
(E) (audience)

A	B	C	D	E
article,	argues, argument,	comparing, contrasting	show	formal
book review,	asserts, assertion,	telling, explaining,	point out	informal
essay,	suggests, suggestion,	illustrating, demonstrating,	suggest	sarcastic
column,	claims, questions,	defining, describing,	inform	humorous
editorial	explains, explanation	listing	persuade	contemptuous
			convince	

Natalia Leyva

Professor Cyr

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Rhetorical Précis

In the article “End Homework Now” (2001), Etta Kralovec and John Buell claim that the practice of assigning homework is not an effective teaching method because its negative effects outweigh its benefits. Kralovec and Buell support their claims by providing examples of how homework disrupts families, overburdens children and limits learning and by dispelling myths about the benefits of homework and providing alternative practices that would lead to improvement in student achievement. The authors’ purpose is to make the reader question a practice that is a trademark of the U.S. education system and decide whether it is conducive to creating a “smarter” student. They seem to be speaking to the entire educational community: administrators, teachers, students and parents.

More on the Rhetorical Precis

This article is from Dr. William P Banks

In 1988, Margaret Woodworth reported on a reading/writing method that demonstrated significant success with her students at various levels, particularly in their reading comprehension and preparation for using source materials in their own academic writing. That method, which [Woodworth](#) calls "the rhetorical precis," will be a central part of our writing this semester as we seek to know more about topics for our major projects. I reprint the basic outline here from Woodworth's article:

Sentence 1:

Name of author, [optional: a phrase describing the author], the genre and title of the work, date in parentheses (additional publishing information in parentheses or note), 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.

Sentence 2:

An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis usually in chronological order.

Sentence 3:

A statement of the author's apparent purpose, followed by an "in order" phrase.

Sentence 4:

A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience. (54)

Woodworth included this example, as well, in her article:

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).

Notice that Woodworth's example follows her pattern exactly. The first sentence identifies the author (Baker), the genre (essay), the title and date, and uses an active verb (asserts) and the relative pronoun *that* to explain what exactly Baker asserts. The second sentence explains the first by offering chronological examples from Baker's essay, while the third sentence suggests the author's purpose and WHY (in order to) he has set out that purpose (or seems to have set out that purpose --not all essays are explicit about this information and readers have to put the pieces together). The final sentence identifies the primary audience of the essay (college students) and suggests how this audience is brought into/connected to the essay's purpose. (For some other examples, click [here](#).)