

Rhetorical Précis – description and examples

In order to help us quickly and effectively describe the argument an author is making in a text, we can use a method of description called the rhetorical précis. Developed by Margaret Woodworth,¹ this method is designed to highlight key elements of the rhetorical situation and help students with reading comprehension and treatment of source materials in their writing.

This précis is a highly structured four-sentence paragraph that records the essential rhetorical elements in any spoken or written discourse. The précis includes the name of the speaker/writer(s), the context or situation in which the text is delivered, the major assertion, the mode of development for or support of the main idea, the stated and/or apparent purpose of the text, and the relationship between the speaker/writer(s) and the audience. The following is a breakdown of the information you should include in each one of the four sentences.

Name of the author, a phrase describing the author, the type and title of the work, the date (in parenthesis), a rhetorically accurate verb (such as “assert,” “argue,” “suggest,” “imply,” “claim,” “question,” etc.) that describes what the author is doing in the text, and a THAT clause in which you state the major assertion (argument statement) of the author’s text.

1. An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the argument—the rhetorical structure of the text (for instance, comparing and contrasting, narrating, illustrating, defining, etc.). Your explanation is usually presented in the same chronological order that the items of support are presented in the work.
2. 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.
3. A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the author.

Rhetorical Précis Frame

1. (Author’s credentials), (author’s first and last name) **in his/her** (type of text), (title of text), **published in** (publishing info) **addresses the topic of** (topic of text) **and argues that** (argument).
1. **He/she supports this claim by** _____, **then** _____, **then** _____, **and finally** _____.
1. 3. (Author’s last name)’s **purpose is to** (author’s purpose in writing) **in order to** (change in reader/society the author wants to achieve).
2. 4. **He/she adopts a(n)** _____ **tone for his/her audience, the readers of** (publication) **and others interested in the topic of** _____.

¹ Woodworth, Margaret K. "The Rhetorical Précis." *Rhetoric Review* 7 (1988): 156-164. "The Rhetorical Précis." *Rhetoric Review* 7 (1988): 156-164.

Example 1:

1. Economist Jeremy Rifkin, in the LA Times editorial titled “A Change of Heart About Animals” (September 1, 2003), **argues that** new scientific evidence demonstrates that humans and animals are more alike than previously assumed.
2. Rifkin supports his claim by introducing human attributes assumed lacking in animals and then providing evidence that show animals share these characteristics.
3. **The author’s purpose** is to persuade us that animals and humans are similar **in order to** gain support for ethical treatment of animals.
4. The author writes in a respectful tone with informal language to appeal to the broad audience that reads the LA Times.

Example 2:

1. British philosopher, John Stuart Mill, in his essay “On Nature” (1850), **argues that** using nature as a standard for ethical behavior is illogical.
2. **He supports this claim by** first giving the common definitions of nature as, “all that exists or all that exists without the intervention of man” and then supplying extensive examples of the daily brutality of nature in the real world.
3. **His purpose is** to call attention to the flaws in the “nature as a standard” argument **in order to convince** people to discard this standard **and** to instead use reason and logic to determine the appropriate ethical standard of action for mankind.
4. He **establishes** a formal, scholarly tone for the reader of “Nature”—an **audience** of philosophers, educators, and other interested citizens.

More Examples

1. Textbook author 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.
2. Baker **supports this assertion by** showing examples of how appropriate 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).
3. **His purpose is** to make his readers aware of the dangers of negative attitudes **in order to** help them become better writers.
4. **He establishes an** informal relationship with his audience of college students who are interested in learning to write “with conviction.”

NOTE that 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.

The following two précis minimally change the order of the information. However, please note that these précis maintain the four-sentence structure and contain all the needed information.

1. Independent scholar, Indur M. Goklancy in a policy analysis for the Cato institute, argues that globalization has created benefits in overall "human well-being." 2. He supports his claim by providing statistics that show how factors such as mortality rates, child labor, lack of education, and hunger have all decreased under globalization. 3. His purpose is to show that the success of globalization should be judged by many measures instead of just income inequality in order to rebut social critics of globalization. 4. He establishes an objective, scientific tone to convince the readers of the Cato Institute, policy makers, and interested citizens that his view is informed and logical

1. In her article "Who Cares if Johnny Can't Read?" (1997), Larissa MacFarquhar asserts that Americans are reading more than ever despite claims to the contrary and that it is time to reconsider why we value reading so much, especially certain kinds of "high culture" reading. 2. MacFarquhar supports her claims about American reading habits with facts and statistics that compare past and present reading practices, and she challenges common assumptions by raising questions about reading's intrinsic value. 3. Her purpose is to dispel certain myths about reading in order to raise new and more important questions about the value of reading and other media in our culture. 4. She seems to have a young, hip, somewhat irreverent audience in mind because her tone is sarcastic, and she suggests that the ideas she opposes are old-fashioned positions. *From Bean, John C., Virginia A. Chappell, and Alice M. Gillam. Reading Rhetorically, Brief Edition. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004. p. 63.*