

Rhetorical Précis*

Definition:

The précis is a highly structured four sentence paragraph 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

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 "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 – always identifying the rhetorical mode(s) employed.
3. A statement of the author's apparent purpose followed (introduce with the infinitive “to”).
4. A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

Purpose

The first sentence is probably the most difficult. Explaining the different rhetorical strategies that an author may use, for example, requires defining the differences between an assertion and an argument. Students tend to use 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).

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.”

The third sentence sometimes inadvertently restates the thesis: “The author's purpose is to prove that . . .” Remember that one purpose is always to put forward a thesis, but there are others as well. The “in order to” phrase keeps you from falling back on “Her purpose is to inform,” and requires that you look beyond to assess what the author wants the audience to do or to feel as a result of reading the work.

In the fourth sentence, you need to ask how the language of the work excludes certain audiences (e.g. 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. Remember that the audience is rarely, if ever, “anyone” or “the general public.” This sentence may also report the author's tone. “He establishes a distant tone by excessively using passive voice and by referring to himself as ‘this author.’”

*Adapted from Rhetoric Review, Vol. 7, No. 1, Fall 1988 and Valerie Stevenson, PHHS

Sample Rhetorical Précis

Sandra M. Gilbert, professor 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 Ferdean – 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, Byron, and others and are intrigued by feminist theory as it relates to Victorian literature.