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)

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

*from: http://www.lanzbom.org/Rhetorical_Precis_270B.pdf*
Rhetorical Précis – Description and Examples

In order to help us quickly and effectively describe the argument an author is making in a text, we will be utilizing a method of description called the rhetorical précis. Developed by Margaret Woodworth, 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.

1. 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.

2. 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.

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.

4. A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the author.

Example: British philosopher, John Stuart Mill, in his essay “On Nature” (1850), argues that using nature as a standard for ethical behavior is illogical. He supports this claim by first giving the common definitions of what the author is doing in the text, and including a formal, scholarly tone for the reader of “Nature”—an audience of philosophers, educators, and other interested citizens.

from: www.wuhsd.org/cms/lib/ca01000258/Centricity/3/1/rhetorical_precis.doc

More Samples

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. 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. 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. 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.


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/~sadinuso/precis.htm

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

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

from http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/rhetorical-precis/sample/peirce_sample_precis_click.html