

PRECIS WRITING

Precis (pray-see, pl. pray-seez) writing is a basic and very useful skill. It has been variously referred to as 'abbreviation', 'subtraction', 'abstract', 'summary', and 'condensation'. The French gave it the name 'precis' — the pruning away of all that is inessential.

Definition:

"A precis is a brief, original summary of the important ideas given in a long selection. Its aim is to give the general effect created by the original selection." It is a concise and lucid summary that forsakes all unnecessary details (including illustrations, amplifications, and embellishments) in favor of reproducing the logic, development, organization and emphasis of the original. Retaining the substance of a fuller statement, it seeks to articulate another author's thoughts by extracting the maximum amount of information and carefully conveying it in a minimum number of words.

The Purpose:

Precis writing aims at intelligent reading and clear, accurate writing. It is a skill of both analysis and genesis that critically questions every thought included and excluded, each word used to express those thoughts, and the proportions and arrangements of those thoughts — both in the original and in the precis. In its exaction it mercilessly reveals an author's wordiness and looseness or thinness of thought and construction. It should strengthen our style, our sense of proportion and emphasis, and our sensitivity to word meanings and an author's viewpoint,

Guide to a Successful Precis:

1. Understand the essential facts or dominating idea of the passage.
2. In your opening sentence express what the passage tends to show.
3. With as few sentences as possible enlarge on the essential shown in the opening sentence.
4. Summarize only what the author says; do not add your own opinions.
5. As far as possible, use your own words.
6. Ask whether the precis is clear to one who has not seen the original.

A precis is usually **reduced to at least one-fourth of its original length** and frequently much more. How long it is will be determined by its purpose and by the nature of the original.

PRELIMINARY TO PRECIS WRITING:

1. An **abstract** is a condensation of a passage, the important words, phrases, and sentences containing the essential thoughts being worked as simply as possible into sentences. It simply requires the ability to pick out essential facts. Exercises in abstracting will involve underscoring the essential facts in a passage and combining them into a single whole. (N.b.: Here 'abstract' is used in its narrow sense to mean a digest or running summary.)

2. A **paraphrase** is a restatement of a difficult passage, stating clearly and fully in language of the simplest sort just what the passage means. Because it clarifies hidden meanings and obscure passages, it is usually longer than the original." Precis writing involves the ability to paraphrase, but adds to it concision, all the while being careful not to lose or distort the original meaning. Exercising in paraphrasing might involve transposing poetry to prose, explaining the meaning of proverbs, etc.

3. In precis writing it is necessary to say as much as possible in as few words as possible." A word may substitute for a phrase and a phrase for a clause. The concern is for the **precise meaning** or connotation of a **word**.

4. The proper use of the colon and semicolon in **punctuation** is an aid to good precis writing.

5. Generally a precis should be written in **reported or indirect speech**. This means a precis will be in third person, in the past tense. Exercises will involve the change of direct speech to indirect speech.

6. A **precis title** must be cold and matter of fact, not attractive to the imaginative mind. It is a precis of the precis.

Ask of your precis:

1. Are the opening sentences brief and to the point? Which is best?
2. Which opening sentence tends to show best what the passage expresses?
3. Do the sentence following the opening sentence amplify the essentials shown in the opening sentence?
4. Which precis clarifies the author's best thoughts? Have additional thoughts been added?
5. Is the precis clear to one who has not seen the original?

METHOD:

“It will be well to remember the object of precis writing: a brief and clear summary — or precis — of what you have first carefully read. No words, phrases, clauses, or sentences which are unessential to the thought of the selection, are considered. Every unnecessary word is discarded until all that you have left is the thought, the dominating idea, of what you have read. Then in your own words, give this thought as briefly and clearly as possible. Your sentences must be carefully constructed. Do not omit any essential articles, prepositions, or conjunctions.”

First Reading:

1. Read every word slowly and carefully until you clearly understand the sense of the passage.
2. Look up all unfamiliar words, phrases, and allusions
3. Identify the dominating idea, the essential thought, of the passage. Ask if this idea were omitted, would the fundamental meaning of the **passage** be changed?
4. Determine what emphasis and space to give the thought in each section; write a heading for each section.

Second Reading:

1. Underscore with a pencil the important facts containing the essential thoughts. This is a process of differentiation between what is essential and what is not. Generally you will omit examples, illustrations, conversations, and repetitions.
2. Reread your selection to see that they are wise and adequate.
3. Determine if your underscoring expresses the main ideas.

Final Reading:

Rapidly and intensely reread the origin, dwelling on the important facts selected for a precis.

First Copy:

1. Close the book/original.
2. Write a summary of the thoughts as you remember them.
3. Compare with the original and correct, asking:

Did you retain the logical order and development of these thoughts?

Did you emphasize the dominant thought or erroneously emphasize a minor thought?

Did you omit any necessary facts? names? dates? places?

Is your precis clear to one who has not seen the original?

Are your sentences clear and well-constructed?

Did you use third person and the past tense?

Did you punctuate and spell correctly?

Did you make any grammatical or rhetorical errors?

Final Copy:

1. Read your first copy through carefully.
2. Condense wherever you can, substituting single words for phrases and phrases for longer clauses.
3. Use only simple figures of speech.
4. Clearly and concisely express the essential points.
5. Reduce verbiage while still making the point and retaining some of the flavor and spirit of the original.
6. Be fair to the sentiments expressed, even if you don't agree with them.
7. Rewrite neatly.

References:

Paul W. Lehmann's "The Junior Precis Practice Pad"

Robert M. Gay's "Writing Through Reading,"

(material abstracted from http://www.classicalco-op.com/co_op_new/ce_tiki/tiki-index.php?page=Precis%20Writing)