

THE PRÉCIS THEME, OR ABSTRACT

A précis is a shortening, in your own words, of the text of a written work. In writing a précis you describe, as accurately as possible, what happens in a story or play, or you briefly restate, abridge, digest, or encapsulate the substance or main ideas in an essay, article, or poem. Other words that describe the précis or abstract are *paraphrase*, *condensation*, and *epitome*. All these words suggest a shortening or a highlighting of only the most significant details and sections of a work.

The length of your précis depends on the extent of the original work and the approximate length of your assignment. Thus, a 3,000-word story might be condensed into 100 or 1,000 words. The amount of detail to include naturally depends on the desired length of the précis. The 1,000-word précis would contain much detail, whereas the 100-word précis would not have much more than the main headings.

USES OF THE PRÉCIS

The précis is important in the service of study, research, and speaking and writing. One of the best ways to study any work is to write a précis of it, for by so doing you force yourself to grasp each of the parts. Also, referring later to your précis helps to bring the entire work back to your memory. There are few better ways to begin careful study.

When you do research, you must take notes on the material you find. Here the ability to shorten and paraphrase is essential, for it is impossible to reproduce everything in your notes. The better you are able to write a précis, the better will be your research.

In discussions, you will improve your arguments if you refer briefly but accurately to sections of the work being discussed. When you are writing a theme, particularly a longer one, it is often necessary to remind your reader of the events or facts in the work. Here the need is not to tell *everything*, but just enough so that your conclusions will be self-sustaining. In an argumentative or persuasive speech or theme, when you are trying to convince your listeners or readers, it is necessary to get the facts straight in order to eliminate objections that may arise about your use of detail.

For all these occasions you will profit from being able to paraphrase or abstract. Although you may sometimes need to condense an entire plot or epitomize an entire argument, most often you will refer only to parts of works, because your arguments will depend on a number of separate interpretations. No matter what your future needs are, however, your ability to write a précis will be helpful to you.

PROBLEMS IN WRITING A PRÉCIS

1. **Accuracy.** Just as the précis is important in establishing a “handle” on the facts, one of the first problems in writing a précis is to be sure that you get the facts straight. You should make no unsupported statements. Let us suppose that you are writing about so simple and well-remembered a story as “Hansel and Gretel.” Suppose you write that “the children eventually overcome the witch by thrusting her into the oven.” This statement is only

partially true. It is not *both* children who defeat the witch, but Gretel alone, for Hansel is locked up in a cage at the time the witch and Gretel are preparing the oven. If you think only casually about what to write, however, it would be natural to say that “the children” are both agents of victory. It is important to go over your précis carefully to make sure that all you say is factually correct.

- 2. Using Your Own Words.** Another problem is the difficulty you may find in using your own words in your précis to replace the words and ideas in the original. The best way is to read the work carefully at least three times. Then put the work away, out of sight, and do your writing. In this way you force yourself to use your own words, without the temptation of borrowing directly from the original.

If you find, however, that you have used some words and phrases from your source, be careful to underline, star, or otherwise mark these borrowed words, and then try to use your own words when you revise. If it seems impossible to make changes of some words, you may preserve a small number of the originals, but be sure to include them within quotation marks in your final draft.

- 2. Selecting Details.** The third problem is deciding what details to select. Try to pick out only those that are the greatest significance. A writer may tell about two people who, in a restaurant, order a wide variety of dishes and engage in lengthy conversation. Obviously, in a précis you do not want to mention each item of food and drink. If one of the characters gets drunk, however, it might be important to state that the character drank too much. Similarly, you would not need to report all the conversation, but only that part which contained the important details, such as that a character was happy or unhappy. The reporting of detail is critical in the way your précis will be judged. Some things are more important than others, and you must choose details according to this scale of importance.

From: Roberts, Edgar V., Writing Themes About Literature, 1983