

WRITING A PRÉCIS, OR ABRIDGMENT

A précis is a shortening, in your own words, of the text of a written work. The words *précis* and *precise* are closely related, and this connection is helpful in enabling an understanding of the nature of a précis—namely, a cutting down of a story, play, or long poem into its *precise*, essential parts. The object is to make a short encapsulation of a work. Other words describing the précis are *abridgment*, *paraphrase*, *abstract*, *condensation*, and *epitome*. *Epitome* is particularly helpful as a description for a précis, for an epitome is a cutting away of inessentials, so that only the important, most vital parts remain.

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. Writing a précis can be used in note-taking, preparation for exams, establishment and clarification of facts for any body of discourse, study for classroom discussion, and the reinforcement of things learned in the past. The object of a précis should not be to tell everything, but only as much as will give the highlights, so that any reader would know the main points of the work about which the précis has been written.

When you do research (see Chapter 18, pp. 257-283), 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 an essay, 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 essay, when you are trying to convince your listeners or readers, it is necessary to present a common understanding of the facts so that you can eliminate possible objections that may be raised about your use of detail.

For all these occasions you will profit from the technique of paraphrasing or abstracting. Although you may sometimes need to condense an entire plot or epitomize an entire argument, most often you will refer to no more than 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.

GUIDELINES

The guidelines to follow in the development of a précis are these:

- 1. Selection.** Only essential details belong in a précis. For example, at the opening of the story “The Necklace” (for the text of this story, see Appendix C, pp. 314-19), De Maupassant describes the pleasing daydreams of the major character, Mathilde Loisel. She is preoccupied

with visions of the pleasures of wealth, such as large anterooms, tapestries, lamps, valets, silks, end tables, expensive bric-a-brac, private rooms, and elegant and exotic meals. Including references of all these, however, would needlessly lengthen a précis of “The Necklace.” Instead, it is sufficient to say something like “Mathilde daydreams about wealth,” because this description gets at the vital facts about her dissatisfaction with her life and her longing for a wealthier one.

The concentration on essentials enables the shortening required of a précis. Thus, a 5000-word story might be epitomized in 100, 200, or 400 words. It is clear that more details might be selected for inclusion in a longer précis than in shorter ones. Whatever the length of the final précis, however, selection of detail is to be based on the importance of the material in the work being considered.

- 2. Accuracy.** All details in your précis should be both correct and accurate. There is a problem not just of factual misstatement, but also of using words that might give a misleading impression of the original. Thus, in “The Necklace,” Mathilde cooperates with her husband for ten long years to repay their 18,000-franc debt. In a précis about this detail it would be easy, and correct, to say that she “works” during this time. The word “works” is misleading, however, for it may be interpreted to mean that Mathilde gets paid for outside employment. In fact, she does not. What De Maupassant tells us is that Mathilde gives up her servant girl and then does all the heavy housework herself as a part of her general economizing in her own household, not in the houses of others.

In the same way, the need to condense long sections of a work necessarily produces the need for comprehensive words that accurately account for sections of the story, play, or narrative poem. Thus, in “The Necklace,” Loisel needs 36,000 francs to replace the lost necklace. He is far short of this sum, and he therefore borrows 18,000 francs to make it up. Just to say “he borrows money,” however (even the exact sum), does not accurately account for the outrageous interest rates set by the lenders and loan sharks with whom he deals. To be accurate, a précis description must also refer to these desperate promises to pay. Thus, a clause like “he accepts almost ruinous interest rates to get the needed loans” covers not only the borrowing, but also the way in which Loisel mortgages the future. For any précis, word choices should be made with comprehensive accuracy.

- 3. Diction.** The précis is to be an original essay, to be judged as original, and therefore it should be written in your own words, not those from the work you are abridging. The best way to ensure original wording is to read the work, record the major events, and then put the work out of sight during the writing process. That way, you can avoid the temptation to borrow words directly.

However, if a number of words from the text find their way into the précis even after you have tried conscientiously to be original, then it is important to put these words into quotation marks. As long as direct quotations are kept at a minimum, they are acceptable. Too many quoted words, however, indicate that the précis is not really original writing.

4. **Objectivity.** A précis should be scrupulously factual. It is therefore necessary to avoid explanatory or introductory material unless it is a true part of the story. As much effort should be made to avoid conclusions in a précis as is exerted to include them in other kinds of writing about literature. Here is a comparative example of what to do and what to avoid:

What To Do

Mathilde Loisel, a French housewife married a minor clerk, is unhappy with her poor household possessions. She daydreams about wealth and is even more dissatisfied after visiting Jeanne Forrestier, a rich woman who is a former schoolmate. One day Loisel, Mathilde's husband, brings home an invitation to an exclusive dinner dance. Mathilde angrily claims that she has nothing to wear, but Loisel gives her all his savings to buy a party dress.

What To Avoid

De Maupassant opens the story by introducing the dissatisfaction that ultimately will propel Mathilde Loisel and her husband of their ten-year disaster. Mathilde's unhappiness with her own household possessions, and her dreams about wealth, lead her naturally to reproach her husband when he brings home the invitation to the dinner at the Ministry of Education. It is clear that her unhappiness leads her to spend beyond their means for a special party dress.

The right-hand column contains a guiding topic sentence, to which the following sentences adhere. Such writing is commendable everywhere else, but not in a précis. The left-hand column is better writing as a précis, for it presents a selection of details only as they appear in the story, without introductory sentences, because in the story there are no such introductions.

5. **Sentences.** Because of the concise and factual nature of the précis, it is tempting to write sentences that are comparable to short bursts of machine-gun fire. Sentences of this kind are often called "choppy" or "bumpy." Here is an example of choppy sentences:

Mathilde gives up her nice apartment. She works hard for ten years. She climbs stairs. She cleans the floors. She uses big buckets of water. She gets coarse and loud. She haggles with shopkeepers. She is no longer young a beautiful.

An entire essay consisting of sentences like these make readers feel as though they actually have been machine-gunned. The problem is to include detail but also to remember to shape and organize sentences. Here is a more acceptable set of sentences revised to contain the same information:

She gives up her nice apartment and devotes herself to hard work for the entire ten years. At home, she climbs many stairs and throws buckets of water to clean the floors. When marketing, she haggles with shopkeepers for bargains. At the end of the time, this hard work has made her loud and course, and her youthful beauty is gone.

This revision blends the shorter sentences together and attempts to make a contrast between the second and the third sentences. Even though sentences in a précis are to be almost rigidly factual, there is a need to make them as graceful as possible.

WRITING A PRÉCIS

Your writing task is to make a reduction of the original with the least possible distortion. Thus it is necessary to keep intact the arrangement and sequence of the original. For example, let us suppose that a work has a surprise ending, like that in “The Necklace.” In a précis, it is important to keep the same order and withhold the conclusion until the very end. It is proper, however, to introduce essential details of circumstance, such as names and places, at the beginning of the précis, even though these details are not brought out immediately in the story. For example, De Maupassant does not name Mathilde right away, and he never says that she is French, but a précis of “The Necklace” would be obscure if these details were withheld.

If your assignment is to write a very short précis, say 100 to 150 words, you might confine everything to only one paragraph. For a longer précis, the normal principle of devoting a separate paragraph to each topic applies. If each major division, episode, scene, action, or section of the story or play is considered a topic, then the précis may be divided into paragraphs devoted to each of the divisions.

Sometimes the author may number these divisions or scenes, or sometimes, as in De Maupassant’s “The Necklace,” the author may use spaces on the page to separate the parts or scenes of the work. The paragraphing in the same theme recognizes these divisions, although for brevity some of the spaced sections are combined into one paragraph. The first paragraph, for example, includes the first three spaced divisions, leading up to the dinner dance. The last paragraph follows the last spaced division exactly. Sometimes stories have no such divisions, but seem to run continuously. For these you may need to create your own topics, such as (1) the events leading up to the main action, (2) the action itself, and (3) the consequences of the action. Or you may be able to determine sections for paragraphing according to the entrances or exits of some of the characters. Always, you must use your own judgement about paragraphing, and the best way is to let the work itself be your guide.

Sample Theme

*A Précis of De Maupassant’s “The Necklace”**

[1] Mathilde Loisel, a Parisian housewife married to a minor clerk, is unhappy with her poor household possessions. She daydreams about wealth, and is even more dissatisfied after visiting Jeanne Forrestier, a rich woman who is a former schoolmate. One day Loisel, Mathilde’s husband, brings home an invitation to an exclusive dinner dance. Mathilde angrily claims that she has nothing to wear, but Loisel gives her all his money to buy a party dress. With no jewelry to match, she is ready to give up the affair, but at Loisel’s suggestion she borrows a beautiful necklace from Jeanne.

[2] At the party, Mathilde is a huge success, but afterward she and Loisel hurry away because she is ashamed to be seen in her everyday shawl. Upon arriving home, she is horrified to discover that she has lost the necklace.

*For the text of this story, please see Appendix C, pp. 314-19.

- [3] In desperation, Loisel and she spend a week looking for the necklace. Unable to find it, Loisel buys another for 36,000 francs. He uses his entire inheritance for half of this sum, and borrows the rest wherever he can, accepting almost ruinous interest rates to get the needed loans.
- [4] For the next ten years Mathilde and Loisel make sacrifices to pay back both principal and interest. She gives up her nice apartment and devotes herself to hard work for the entire ten years. At home, she climbs many stairs and throws buckets of water to clean the floors, When marketing, she haggles with shopkeepers for bargains. At the end of the time, this hard work has made her loud and coarse, and her youthful beauty is gone.
- [5] One Sunday she takes a walk in the fashionable Champs-Élysées and sees Jeanne, who does not recognize her at first because of her changed appearance. Mathilde tells Jeanne of her ten years of sacrifice. Sympathetically, Jeanne responds by explaining that the original necklace had been false, and worth no more than 500 francs.

COMMENTARY ON THE THEME

This précis, about 300 words long, illustrates the selection of major actions and the omission of interesting but inessential detail. Thus, the clause “she daydreams about wealth” contains four words, but it condenses more than 150 words of detailed description in the story. The next clause about the rich friend, Jeanne Forrestier, is longer, but it condenses a relatively short passage in the story. The clause is important, however, because it relates Mathilde’s increased dissatisfaction upon seeing Jeanne, and Jeanne is doubly important, for she is the owner of the false necklace that is the cause of the Loisel family downfall. The principle here is this: The selection of what to include in a précis depends not so much upon the length as upon the significance of parts in the original.

Each of the five paragraphs in the précis is devoted to a comparable episode of “The Necklace.” Paragraph 1 describes the story up to the party; paragraph 2 the events of the party leading up to the discovery of the loss. The third and fourth paragraphs deal with the borrowing of money to restore the necklace, and with the ten-year sacrifice to pay back the loans. The last paragraph contains the scene in which Mathilde learns that the sacrifice was unnecessary.

The basis in the précis for determining the appropriateness of episodes to paragraphs is not time but unity. Thus, paragraph 1 is unified by Mathilde’s dissatisfaction, which leads her to accept her husband’s savings for her dress and also to borrow the seemingly expensive necklace for the party. Paragraph 2 describes an episode that takes place within a few hours, but the unifying element is the party and the discovery of the loss immediately after it. The events of paragraph 4, on the other hand, take ten years, and the unifying principle is the coarsening of Mathilde’s character under the effects of her long and hard labors.