

## Writing a Summary or Rhetorical Précis to Analyze Nonfiction Texts

Academic writers across all disciplines analyze texts. They summarize and critique published articles, evaluate papers' arguments, and reflect on essays. In order to do these things, they have to read complex texts carefully and understand them clearly.

This handout is about how you can read and analyze nonfiction texts. When you've read a text well, you can then discuss it in class, think critically about it, incorporate it into your writing, consider it in light of other texts, and advance or push against its ideas. We believe two productive strategies for approaching this kind of reading and analysis are active reading and rhetorical précis writing. This page provides a guide to these strategies and practical ways to help you evaluate, compare, and reflect upon nonfiction texts.

### Active Reading

Active reading requires you to slow your reading down, engage more intentionally with the text, think about it, and focus your attention on its ideas. When you read actively, you can't just flip pages and daydream about tomorrow's plans. Much has been written about active reading, but generally we recommend that when you read you:

- **Skim over the text before reading it.**

Look to see how long it is, where it's published, how it may be divided into sections, what kind of works cited list it has, whether there are appendices, etc. Use the title to help you predict what the text is about and what it argues. This overview will help you to understand the context, genre, and purpose of this piece as well as help you gauge how long it will take you to read it and how it might be relevant to your class, paper, or project.

- **Take notes about the text's key ideas and your responses to those ideas.**

Depending on the text and your preferences, these notes could be made on your copy of the text or article or in a separate place. Notes will help you remember and process what the text is about and what you think about it.

In addition to these strategies, we firmly believe that one of the best ways to understand a book, article, essay, blog post, etc. is to write a summary of it. Specifically, we recommend that you use your reading to generate a rhetorical précis.

### Introduction to the Rhetorical Précis

"Précis" is French for "specific" or "precise." It's also a particular kind of writing. When you write a précis you have to exactly and succinctly account for the most important parts of a text. If you write a successful précis, it is a good indication that you've read that text closely, that you understand its major moves and arguments. Writing a précis is an excellent way to show that you've closely read a text.

**Disclaimer:** There are different kinds of précis for different contexts. A legal précis is different from what we're talking about here. Some précis are longer or shorter than others. If you are writing a précis as a course assignment, be sure to follow your instructor's guidance on what this should consist of and how it should be formatted.

Sometimes rhetorical précis writing is a course requirement. However, even if you aren't required to write a précis for a class, writing one can help you in a number of ways. Writing a précis guides your reading and directs your attention to the key aspects of a text. Précis writing prepares you to discuss a text and sets you up for that important next step: analysis. A rhetorical précis can even help you structure your annotated bibliography annotations or provide you with summary sentences to include in a paper as you account for your sources.

## Parts of a Rhetorical Précis

A rhetorical précis, as developed by Margaret K. Woodworth and described in her 1988 article "The Rhetorical Précis" (published by *Rhetoric Review*), consists of four dense but direct sentences:

1. The first sentence identifies who wrote the text, where and when it was published, and what its topic and claim are.
2. The second sentence explores how the text is developed and organized.
3. The third sentence explains why the author wrote this, her purpose or intended effect.
4. The fourth and final sentence describes the "for whom" of the text by clarifying who the intended or assumed audience of this text is.

Let's look more closely at those four parts.

### **First Sentence: Who, Where, When, and What?**

Start by identifying the author and offering any information that might help clarify who this person is in relation to this text. Is this a scholar? If so, what is her field? Is she a public official or a prominent blogger? Is he a public intellectual? A reporter? A spokesperson? Has he written other stuff? Locate a bio in the journal or the book cover. Do a quick internet search. Figuring out who writer this is will help you understand some of the texts' context.

Next up, the publication. What is its title? Is it a book in a series or an article in a special collection? Does it appear in the leisure section of a local newspaper? Sometimes the title of the journal is self-explanatory, but at other times it's unfamiliar or not clearly connected to a specific discipline. Explain it as necessary. Add the date in parentheses after the title of the text. Unless it's a newspaper, magazine, or time-sensitive online article, usually just the year will suffice.

The rest of the sentence should be about the article's topic—what it is about. In order to make this part particularly precise, use a rhetorically strong verb to describe the author's claim. For example, the author may suggest, argue, analyze, imply, urge, contrast, or claim something.

### **Second Sentence: How?**

In this sentence, provide a very condensed outline of how the author develops, structures, and supports the argument. What kind of evidence does the article draw upon? How is the case built? Perhaps by comparing and contrasting, illustrating, defining, or providing context? Perhaps the text starts out with a narrative and then moves into a description of several research studies? This sentence should account for all the most important moves made across this piece.

### **Third Sentence: Why?**

What does the writer want the reader to do, believe, feel, or think about all this? What was the purpose of this text? In the first sentence, you told us what that author is arguing; now it is time to

consider why the author has done all of this. Use an “in order to” phrase in this sentence to very clearly indicate the purpose.

#### **Fourth Sentence: For Whom?**

In the final sentence, identify the author’s intended audience and offer some rationale for how you know that to be the audience. Look back at the publication and think about who is likely to read this kind of magazine, journal, or book. Pay attention to the language used in this piece and how much background the writer provides. What does the writer assume readers believe, know, or value? Identifying the audience helps you consider how rhetorically effective this text is.

### **An Annotated Sample of a Rhetorical Précis**

Take a look at this annotated précis of William Cronon’s 1995 article “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” It closely follows the précis structure outlined above.

In “The Trouble With Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” (1995), the opening essay of the edited collection *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, renowned environmental historian William Cronon [Comment: The information about who Cronon is was very easily located at the end of the article and through a quick internet search.] critiques the romantic idolization of supposedly untouched, vast wilderness and argues that such a perspective of wilderness negatively affects humankind’s relationship with nature. Cronon builds a historical case for wilderness as a human construct, explores the cultural and literary foundations for the belief that wilderness is a sublime frontier, identifies the problematic paradoxes inherent in this belief, and outlines the detriments of and possible paradigm-shifting solutions to this environmental problem. [Comment: One of the challenges of the second sentence is to decide what not to include. In this case, more could be said about what those paradoxes and detriments are, but since the focus here is on the “how” instead of the “what,” they have been left out. If those kinds of unidentified details are important enough, there is room to mention them more thoroughly in the third sentence.] Cronon opposes the perspective of wilderness as an idealized, non-human space in order to persuade his readers to live rightly in relationship to nature and embrace the reality that “home” as a welcoming, responsibility-requiring place encompasses both “wilderness” and “civilization.” [Comment: Often there is more than one “why,” so be on the look out for this as you actively read.] According to his specific identification, scholarly presentation, and publication venue, Cronon’s primary audience includes American environmentalist academics. [Comment: In the later third of this essay, Cronon uses the pronoun “we” to identify himself and his assumed readership. Often authors aren’t this useful in helping to identify an audience.]

### **Using a Rhetorical Précis to Guide Analysis**

Writing a good précis is a lot of work. It takes dedicated time and consideration. But it can be useful in and of itself and productive in the development of additional academic writing. Of course, the most obvious application of a précis is connected to its function as a summary. In academic writing, we summarize sources all the time. Once you have written a précis, you can incorporate some of its sentences or ideas into your writing when you need to quickly account for a text’s argument, content, or purpose.

But a rhetorical précis is even more powerfully useful for writing analysis.

Etymologically, “analysis” comes from the Ancient Greek terms for “throughout” and “loosening.” When you analyze something, you deconstruct it, extract its parts, peer inside to see how everything fits together. You thoroughly loosen it in order to understand it better. When you’ve used a précis to lay the primary elements of this text (the author; the argument’s what, how, and why; and the audience) in front of you, you’re ready to move on with your analysis. Analysis of nonfiction texts can take several forms, but three common ones are: evaluation and critique, comparison, and reflection.

### **Evaluation and Critique**

Evaluating a text requires you to use your analysis to consider and critique the strengths and weaknesses of that piece of writing. Look back at the argument and audience and ask yourself some of these questions:

- Is this a persuasive argument for this group of readers?
- How well is the author’s argument developed and clarified through the structure of the text?
- Where does the logic of the argument and its supporting evidence cohere or fall apart?
- Do the author’s background, tone, evidence, and assumptions foster credibility?
- Does the piece achieve what the author intended?

Detailed answers—with examples—to any of these or similar questions could generate enough material for a close, analytical evaluation. Make sure that you are connecting your assertions about what works and doesn’t work in this text to the author, the argument’s development and purpose, and the audience. Make sure that you are looking deeply at how and why various elements of the text and its argument succeed or falter.

### **Comparison**

Through comparison, you bring together an analysis of more than one text. Start by writing a précis for each piece you have to compare. Then look at each précis side-by-side and ask yourself about how a sentence in one précis relates to the corresponding sentence in the other précis. Here are some questions to guide your thinking:

- Are all texts addressing a parallel idea?
- Are they making similar or different arguments?
- Have they employed similar methods to arrive at their arguments?
- Are they using the same kind of structure to develop those arguments?
- What is different about their intended audiences?
- Is one more or less successful or persuasive than the other?

Let what you identify as being similar and different about these texts guide your comparative analysis.

### **Reflection**

Reflection provides you with space to analyze a text in light of your experiences, perspectives, and ideas. In this kind of writing, you get to talk about yourself. In a way, a reflective analysis is kind of like a comparative analysis where the second text is you. Look back at that rhetorical précis and ask yourself questions like these, or other questions that connect what you know and have experienced with the text you have read:

- What else have you read or experienced that furthers or complicates the argument made by this text?
- How do you see that these ideas fit into the larger context of what you’ve been studying in this course?
- Why do you have a particular opinion or response towards this piece of writing?

- Moving forward, how can this text, its argument, or its presentation be influential in shaping your thinking or research?

In reflective writing it can be important to fully describe your own experiences or perspectives in order to explain how they connect to the text you are analyzing. It's also okay to write about how you feel as long as you are addressing emotions in relationship to how you interpret and understand particular aspects of the text.

## Conclusion

In order to analyze a text, you need to understand key elements of it. Closely reading that text and summarizing it through a rhetorical précis can help you understand it better. In large part, the quality of your analysis will be dependent on the quality of your comprehension. So give yourself the time you need to read carefully, think deeply, and analyze effectively.

## Works Cited

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 7-28.  
Woodworth, Margaret K. "The Rhetorical Précis." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 156-64.

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