

Name _____

Date _____

RHETORICAL PRÉCIS

Purpose: Upon completion of this activity, students will first **consider** the précis through the precise description of each sentence's content, then **comprehend** the précis through the included example, and lastly students will **construct** a précis of their own using either the attached essay or an essay that they are currently reading. **This should take approximately 1 hour to complete.**

A rhetorical précis differs from a summary in that it is a less neutral, more analytical condensation of both the content and method of the original text. If you think of a summary as primarily a brief representation of what a text says, then you might think of the rhetorical précis as a brief representation of what a text both says and does. Although less common than a summary, a rhetorical précis is a particularly useful way to sum up your understanding of how a text works rhetorically (*Reading Rhetorically* 62).

THE STRUCTURE OF A RHETORICAL PRÉCIS

Sentence One: Name of author (and a brief fact to establish credibility), type and title of work, date in parentheses; a rhetorically active verb, and a **THAT** clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) in the text.

Sentence Two: An explanation of **how** the author develops and supports the thesis. What mode(s) and kinds of evidence does the author use? (Your explanation is usually presented in the same chronological order that the items of support are presented in the work.) Avoid merely summarizing what the author **says**.

Sentence Three: A statement of the author's apparent purpose, followed by an "in order to" or "so that" phrase in which you explain what the author wants the audience to do or feel as a result of reading (or hearing) the work.

Sentence Four: A description of the author's tone and the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

THE FINISHED PRODUCT

In her article "Who Cares if Johnny Can't Read?" (1997) Larissa MacFarquhar, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, 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. (2) 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. (3) 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. (4) 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.

from Bean, John C., Virginia A. Chappell, and Alice M. Gillam. *Reading Rhetorically*, Brief Edition. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004. P. 63

Name _____

Date _____

Now create a rhetorical précis of your own using an essay you are currently reading for your English class. Use the sentence starters and word banks below to help you.

RHETORICAL PRÉCIS SENTENCE STARTERS

Sentence One (Who/What?) _____, _____
(author's full name) (credibility)

in the _____,
(A) (title)

_____ that _____
(B)

Sentence Two (How?) _____ supports his/her _____
(author's last name) (B)

by (see C) _____

Sentence Three (Why?) The author's purpose is to _____
(D)

_____ in order to / so that _____

Sentence Four (To Whom?) The author writes in/uses a (an) _____ tone for
(E)

(audience)

Name _____

Date _____

Word Bank – some possibilities

A	B	C	D	E
article	analyzes, analysis,	Modes: comparing, contrasting, telling, explaining, illustrating, demonstrating, defining, describing, listing	challenge	angry
blog	argues, argument,	Types of Evidence: analogy, hypothetical situations, factual examples, expert testimony, statistics, personal/anecdotal experience	clarify	blunt
book	asserts, assertion,		complicate	casual
book review	claims, defines,		convince	discouraged
column	definition,		deconstruct	formal
essay	explains, explanation,		extend	humorous
editorial	interprets,		illustrate	neutral
	interpretation,		inform	provocative
	questions,		persuade	
	suggests, suggestion,		point out	
	theorizes, theory		show	
			suggest	

*Adapted by Sarah L. Martin from an earlier version created by Micah Jendian.

I know what it says...but what does it *do*?

*The following verbs will be helpful when analyzing what an author is *doing* (the rhetorical moves he/she is making), rather than what he/she is *saying*.

Acknowledges	Differentiates	Justifies
Amplifies	Discusses	Models
Analyzes	Dissects	Navigates
Argues	Distinguishes	Organizes
Articulates	Establishes	Outlines
Asserts	Evaluates	Persuades
Blends	Exemplifies	Predicts
Challenges	Explains	Presents
Clarifies	Forecasts	Proposes
Compares	Gathers	Proves
Compiles	Generalizes	Qualifies
Concludes	Identifies	Questions
Constructs	Illustrates	Substantiates
Contrasts	Incorporates	Suggests
Debates	Inspects	Summarizes
Deconstructs	Integrates	Theorizes
Defends	Interprets	Traces
Defines	Introduces	Uses

Name _____

Date _____

An Author's Tone

*Here are some examples of the kinds of tone an author can take and the different ways that readers can interpret them. Note that by using the negative connotation as opposed to the neutral connotation, a reader can get across his/her opinions of the author in a rhetorically subtle way.

Tone	Neutral Connotation	Negative Connotation
Angry	Irritated, vexed, indignant	Worked up, offended, furious
Biased	One-sided, partial	Warped, twisted, myopic
Blunt	Frank, candid, direct, plain-spoken	Brutal, cruel, tactless, caustic
Casual	Informal, easy-going	Slick, careless, unprofessional
Challenging	Provocative, defiant, questioning	Argumentative, insulting
Humorous	Amusing, funny, jovial, joking	Absurd, ridiculous, ludicrous, silly
Intellectual	Intelligent, knowledgeable	Egghead, pedantic, know-it-all
Neutral	Impartial, unbiased, open-minded, objective	Disengaged, unengaged, amoral, apathetic
Personable	Friendly, good-natured, affable	Chummy, overly-familiar
Sad	Dispirited, discouraged, unhappy	Pitiful, pathetic, bitter
Sarcastic	Satirical, disparaging, scornful, contemptuous	Insulting, offensive, ill-tempered
Thoughtful vs. Thoughtless	Profound, careful, well-reasoned	Imprudent, rash, tactless

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THE RHETORICAL PRÉCIS

A rhetorical précis (pronounced *pray-see*) differs from a summary in that it is a less neutral, more analytical condensation of both the content and method of the original text. If you think of a summary as primarily a brief representation of what a text says, then you might think of the rhetorical précis as a brief representation of what a text both says and does. Although less common than a summary, a rhetorical précis is a particularly useful way to sum up your understanding of how a text works rhetorically.

► THE STRUCTURE OF A RHETORICAL PRÉCIS

Sentence One: Name of 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.

► CLASSIC RHETORICAL PRÉCIS SENTENCE STARTERS

Sentence One (Who/What?)

_____, in the _____,
(Author) (A) (Title, punctuated correctly),

(B) that _____

(major assertion/thesis statement).

Sentence Two (How?)

(Author's Last Name) supports his/her _____ by _____
(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 _____ tone for _____.
(E) (audience)

Word Bank – some possibilities (see additional handouts)

A	B	C	D	E
article, book review, essay, column, editorial	argues, argument, asserts, assertion, suggests, suggestion, claims, questions, explains, explanation	comparing, contrasting, telling, explaining, illustrating, demonstrating, defining, describing, listing	show point out suggest inform persuade convince	Formal informal sarcastic humorous contemptuous

Précis Examples

A. Sheridan Baker, in his essay "Attitudes" (1966), asserts that writers' attitudes toward their subjects, their audiences, and themselves determine to a large extent the quality of their prose. Baker supports this assertion by showing examples of how inappropriate attitudes can make writing unclear, pompous, or boring, concluding that a good writer "will be respectful toward his audience, considerate toward his readers, and somehow amiable toward human failings" (58). His purpose is to make his readers aware of the dangers of negative attitudes in order to help them become better writers. He establishes an informal relationship with his audience of college students who are interested in learning to write "with conviction" (55).

B. Toni Morrison, in her essay "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks" (2001), 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.

C. 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.

D. 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.

E. Douglas Park, in his essay "Audiences" (1994), suggests that teaching audience is an essential but elusive aspect of teaching writing. Park develops this idea by exploring different definitions of audience, looking at how a text itself can delineate audience, and then discussing specific strategies writers can use to create contexts for audience. His purpose is to help teachers of writing understand and teach the different aspects of audience in order that they can help students improve the sense of audience in their writing. Park establishes an informal relationship with teachers who are interested in strengthening their students' weak writing.

The Rhetorical Précis Cont'—a Breakdown of B (see previous page)

SENTENCE 1 – include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the name of author,• a phrase describing the author (optional),• the type and title of work, the date of work (inserted in parentheses),• a <u>rhetorically accurate</u> verb (such as “assert,” “argue,” “suggest,” “imply,” “claim,” etc.) that describes what the author is doing in the text,• a THAT clause in which you state the major assertion (thesis statement/claim) of the author’s text.	EXAMPLE: <p>Toni Morrison, a well-known scholar in the humanities, 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.</p>
SENTENCE 2 : An explanation of <u>how</u> the author develops and/or supports the thesis (for instance, <i>comparing and contrasting, defining, narrating, illustrating, defining, using humor or sarcasm, relating personal experience, depending on facts /statistics /opinion, etc.</i>). Consider the author’s organization, use of evidence, and/or strategies used to construct his/her argument. Your explanation is usually presented in the same chronological order that the items of support are presented in the work.	EXAMPLE: <p>Morrison supports her implication by describing how Ernest Hemingway writes about black characters and by illustrating his strategies for plot development seen within his novels and short stories.</p>
SENTENCE 3: A statement of the author’s apparent purpose, followed by an <u>IN ORDER TO</u> phrase in which you explain what the author wants the audience to do or feel as a result of reading the work.	EXAMPLE: <p>Her purpose is to make her readers aware of the cruel reality of racism underlying some of the greatest works of American literature <u>IN ORDER TO</u> help them examine the far-reaching effects racism has not only on those discriminated against but also on those who discriminate.</p>
SENTENCE 4: A description of the intended audience and the relationship the author establishes with the audience.	EXAMPLE: <p>She establishes a formal and highly analytical tone with her audience of racially-mixed, theoretically-sophisticated readers and critical interpreters of American literature.</p>

Additional Templates for the Rhetorical Précis (Don't always sound the same)

Provided below are three templates you can refer to when using the rhetorical précis form. You should use these for guidance, but use your best judgment about how to form sentences appropriate to the text and/or author you write about.

1. (Author's credentials), (author's first and last name), in his/her (type of text), (title of text), published in (publishing info), addresses the topic of (topic of text) and argues that (argument).
2. S/he supports this claim by _____, then _____, and finally _____.
3. (Author's last name)'s purpose is to (author's purpose in writing) in order to (change in reader/society the author wants to achieve).
4. He/she adopts a(n) _____ tone for his/her audience, the readers of (publication) and others interested in the topic of _____.

1. In the (type of text), (title of text) ((year)), author (author's first and last name), (author's credentials), asserts that (argument) and suggests (explanation of sub-claims or resolution).
2. S/he backs up this claim by doing the following: first, s/he _____; next, s/he _____; last, s/he _____.
3. (Author's last name) appears to write in hopes of (author's purpose in writing) in order to (change in reader/society the author wants to achieve).
4. Because of the author's _____ tone, it seems as if s/he writes for a _____ and _____ audience.

1. In his/her (type of text) (title of text) ((year)), (author's credentials) (author's first and last name) asserts that (argument) by addressing _____, _____, and _____.
2. By supplying the reader with information about _____ and _____, (author's last name) builds his/her claims about _____.
3. (Author's name) wishes to convey to readers the importance of (author's purpose in writing) in order to (change in reader/society the author wants to achieve).
4. The author's audience likely consists of those interested in _____ as is evident through his/her references to _____ and _____; s/he addresses readers with a tone that is _____ and _____.

Name _____
Date _____

Class _____

Name _____
Date _____

Class _____

Name _____
Date _____

Class _____

Name _____
Date _____

Class _____