

The Rhetorical Précis

In 1988, Margaret Woodworth reported on a reading/writing method that she called "the rhetorical précis," which significantly helped students at various levels, particularly in their reading comprehension and preparation for using source materials in their own academic writing.

Sentence 1: (Claim)

Name of author, the genre and title of the work, date in parentheses (additional publishing information in parentheses or note), a rhetorically accurate verb (such as "asserts," "argues," "suggests," "implies," "claims," etc.), and a THAT clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) of the work.

Sentence 2: (Reasons and Evidence)

An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis usually in chronological order.

Sentence 3: (Author's Purpose)

A statement of the author's apparent purpose, followed by an "in order" phrase.

Sentence 4: (Conclusion)

A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

- Woodworth, Margaret K. "The Rhetorical Précis." *Rhetoric Review* 7 (1988): 156-64. Print.

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.

-Bean, John C., Virginia A. Chappell, and Alice M. Gillam. *Reading Rhetorically*. Brief ed. New York: Pearson, 2004. Print.

This example follows Woodworth's pattern exactly. The first sentence identifies the author (Larissa MacFarquhar), the genre (article), the title and date, and uses an active verb (asserts) and the relative pronoun that to explain exactly what MacFarquhar asserts. The second sentence explains how the writer supports her assertions by stating, in chronological order, that MacFarquhar first presents facts and statistics and next challenges common assumptions by raising questions. The third sentence presents the author's purpose and why (in order to) she has set out that purpose (or seems to have set out that purpose -- not all essays are explicit about this information and readers have to put the pieces together). The final sentence identifies what appears to be the primary audience of the essay (college students) due to her tone.

Although précis are short, they are quite challenging. The benefits, as Woodworth points out in her article, are the following:

- After having used this method for a while, 76% of students found reading difficult texts easier and discovered that they retained information more effectively.
- 80% of those surveyed claimed that the précis helped them to become [better] "critical thinkers."
- Likewise, 80% found that writing the précis helped them to organize longer projects for writing classes.
- Of those surveyed, 56% found the précis useful in other classes, particularly in regard to writing for other classes.
- The same number (56%) found that the précis helped them to write more sophisticated sentence structured (which are one sign of "A" writing to teachers across the disciplines).

- Woodworth, Margaret K. "The Rhetorical Précis." *Rhetoric Review* 7 (1988): 156-64. Print.

Here are other examples of rhetorical précis:

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.

- <http://www.winthrop.edu/english/core/success/precis.htm>

Toni Morrison, 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. 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.

- <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~sapinoso/precis.htm>

Rhetorical Précis Starters

Sentence One (Who? Claim)

_____ in the _____,
(author) (A. Genre) (title)
_____ that _____
(B. verb) (major assertion or thesis)

Sentence Two (What? Reason and Evidence)

_____ supports (her) (his) _____
(author's last name) (claims, assertions, arguments, etc)
by _____
(C. types of evidence from text in order presented in text)

Sentence Three (Why?)

(The author's purpose is to) _____
(D.)
(in order to, so that, etc.) _____

Sentence Four (To Whom?)

(The author writes in a/an _____ (tone for)

(E.)

_____ (apparent audience)

A	B	C	D	E
Article	Argues	Comparing	Argue	Formal
Book	Asserts	Contrasting	Convince	Earnest
Book review	Claims	Defining	Inform	Grave
Chapter in _____	Defends	Describing	Persuade	Humorous
Column	Explains	Explaining	Point out	Informal
Editorial	Suggests	Highlighting	Show	Reflective
Essay	Questions	Illustrating	Suggest that	Serious