

What is a précis?

A précis is a kind of academic summary. Specifically, it's a tightly focused summary of an argument expressed by a piece of academic writing, not a summary of the piece of writing that expresses the argument.

The difference is important. An argument is the attempted demonstration of a claim (a thesis, or “the point,” or the answer to a question) via a structure of reasoning. It is this structure, the construction of the argument that a précis tries to show concisely and clearly. If this is best done by rearranging the material or by spending proportionally less time on a certain point than the author does, then that's what you should do. Don't assume that you should write one sentence summarizing each paragraph in the original work, in the same sequence—or anything like that. Your précis will not be a narrative of what the author said first, then next, then next, etc.; it will be a display of the article's argumentative skeleton.

How Do I Write a Précis?

Writing a précis requires you to actively analyze the target text, and a good précis will reflect this involvement by focusing effectively on what's really important in the argument. Your précis should make the following clear:

the nature of the evidence or reasoning that the author invokes

the key steps in that reasoning

how those steps move the author toward his or her conclusion

A précis should be brief. In fact, one of the challenges of writing a précis is finding ways to write as concisely as possible without oversimplifying the argument you are summarizing.

The purpose of the précis itself is to develop a critical summary and not a critical review. In other words, you're not giving your opinion of the argument. Sometimes, though, a précis will lead into some sort of further comment on the value and persuasiveness of the author's argument. Depending on the specific assignment you are asked to fulfill, a précis can become the starting point for an evaluation of the original argument or even a counter-argument in response to it.

What about Format and Length?

Format the précis like an academic essay. The length will vary depending on the assignment. However, a précis is always a brief piece of writing compared to the original text. For example, a précis of a 20-page published article might be between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.

-From Texas A&M Writing Center

Precis Assignment

Due Date:

Paper versions are due in class; electronic versions must be uploaded to turnitin

Length: Approximately 2 typed, double-spaced pages (500-600 words)

For this assignment, you'll write a précis on a journal article that explores a theme or topic you may be interested in when you go to write your paper on Moby-Dick.

Guidelines:

You should consult the Academic Search Premiere database as well as other online databases, as needed, to find your article. You must write on an article that has been published in a peer-reviewed journal.

You must hand in a printed copy of your article, which you have annotated, along with your precis. You must also post to the blog on the day it is due. Follow directions on Students' post page

The précis should be formal in tone, although you may use the first person.

Reading this article may help you in writing your final paper, but you aren't required to use the article in your paper. You may discover that the article is not as useful as you might have hoped.

You must follow my formatting guidelines: One-inch margins, 12 pt. TNR font, Double-Spaced. You must upload a word doc or docx to turn it in, not an rtf, pdf, txt, or pages file. Just about every word processing application allows you to save as a .doc or .docx, including pages for mac.

A step by step guide to writing an effective precis.

1. Find a critical essay from a peer-reviewed journal
2. Read and annotate the essay. You will have to read it more than once. On a second read through the essay try to map out the author's argument. Make notes in the margins.
3. At the top of the page, after your header include a full bibliographic citation in MLA format of the article (the same sort of entry you would include in a works cited page). You are welcome to use bibliography generators like the one provided via our school's library website.

4. Next, skip a line, indent, and begin with your introductory paragraph

a) In a single coherent sentence give the following:

-name of the author, title of the work, date in parenthesis;

-a rhetorically accurate verb (such as "assert," "argue," "deny," "refute," "prove," "disprove," "explain," etc.);

-a that clause containing the major claim (thesis statement) of the work.

In “Jamesian Feminism: Women in ‘Daisy Miller,’” literary critic Louise Barnett argues that James constructs the iconic landmarks Daisy Miller visits in her brief European tour as imaginary spaces that lie beyond the reach of oppressive social ideologies.

b) In 2-3 coherent sentences give an explanation of how the author develops and supports the major claim or thesis. Discuss the nature of the evidence or reasoning that the author invokes (not the specific evidence, that comes later). What are the key steps in his or her reasoning? You are essentially previewing the logical thread of the argument, the kinds of support provided, and so forth. If the author invents or uses special terms to argue the case, mention and define them.

Through an analysis of the relationship between setting and gender politics Barnett insists that these spaces offer sanctuary to James’s heroine. . .

c) In a single coherent sentence give a statement of the author's purpose, followed by an "in order" phrase.

d.) Next, if this critic explicitly reacts to other scholars by confirming or challenging their conclusions describe where they think their argument fits into a larger critical conversation. What critics or points of view is the author attempting to refute? Where does the author’s argument fit into the larger critical discussion of the issue? Is the author attempting to overturn certain assumptions about the work, and, if so, what are those assumptions?

Barnett suggests that previous critics have failed to consider _____.

You should present the information as objectively as possible. You should not use the abstract published with the journal article or book chapter.

5.) In the next 2-3 paragraphs, you must explain *how* the critic of your essay uses evidence to support his or her argument. What counts as some of their most important evidence? How do they interpret this evidence in order to support their claim? You cannot go into great detail or mention every one of the ways in which an author supports his or her main argument. You must be judicious and present what you think we absolutely need to know.

6.) In a concluding paragraph you may offer a brief evaluation of the author's argument. Don't write that you think an article was good or that it was well written. You may evaluate how effectively a critic supports a thesis. However, rather than finding explicit flaws with the piece, you will likely be far more productive to suggest, "where we can go from here." In other words, discuss the ways the author's argument advances a reader's overall understanding of *Moby-Dick*.

Reading criticism and reacting to it is a learned skill and a difficult one to master. Try not to be intimidated by this assignment. This may be the first time you have been asked to react to a piece of literary criticism. I expect this will be difficult, but ask that you make a serious effort. I want you to engage in an ongoing cultural conversation about literature, and, in doing so, I hope you will develop as a thinker and a writer. As you work on this assignment and as you work on your novel project, the culmination of your work as an English student at Saint Stephen's, understand that no thinker or writer, however brilliant, ends a conversation. There is no final word on any topic. The object of learning is to continue critical and thoughtful conversations, to honestly engage with the theories, beliefs, practices, and ideas we inherit from the past.

Your precis will not receive extensive comments but will be graded using the following rubric:

	Points Available	Points Earned
Full bibliographic citation in MLA format of the article	5	
Printout of article handed in with précis	5	
Introduction.	10	
Body paragraphs: course of argument, use of evidence	10	
Conclusion: "Where do we go from here"	10	
Quality of writing (style, grammar, punctuation, etc.). Follows Formatting guidelines? On blog?	10	

Total	50	
-------	----	--