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 (author) _____, in the (genre)_____, ____, (Title, punctuated correctly) ____**(B)**__ that _____(major assertion/thesis statement) _____.

Sentence Two (How?)

(author)_____ supports his/her ____**(B)**_____ 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 Genre	B What the writer is doing.	C How the Writer Supports their claim	D Purpose	E **tone**
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 instrisic 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: • the name of author, • a phrase describing the author (optional), • the type and title of work, the date of work (inserted in parentheses), • a rhetorically accurate 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: 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.

SENTENCE 2 : An explanation of **how** the author develops and/or supports the thesis (for instance, *comparing and contrasting, defining, narrating, illustrating, defining, using humor or sarcasm, relating personal experience, depending on facts /statistics /opinion*, etc.). 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: 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.

SENTENCE 3: A statement of the author's apparent purpose, followed by an IN ORDER TO phrase in which you explain what the author wants the audience to do or feel as a result of reading the work.	EXAMPLE: 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.

SENTENCE 4: A description of the intended audience and the relationship the author establishes with the audience.	EXAMPLE: She establishes a formal and highly analytical tone with her audience of racially-mixed, theoretically sophisticated readers and critical interpreters of American literature.

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** .

INTRODUCTION COMPONENTS

S - Speaker Who is the speaker? WHO? WHAT?
P - Purpose What is the speaker's purpose? WHY?
A - Audience Who is the audience? FOR WHO?
C - Context What is the context or climate?
E - Exigence What is the event that requires this message?

C - Choices What specific communication choices did the creator use to convey the message? Why did they make those choices?