

Writing For This Course: Rhetorical Précis Writing

[Adapted from V. Stevenson and M. Frerichs, AP Language and Composition PHHS, San Diego, reprint date: 6/20/2012]

A **rhetorical précis** analyzes both **content** (the *what*) and **delivery** (the *how*) of a bit of writing or speech. It is a highly structured four-sentence paragraph blending summary and analysis. Each sentence requires specific information. You should use brief quotations to convey a sense of the author's style and tone, and must include a terminal bibliographic reference. It looks like this:

1. **THE FIRST SENTENCE identifies** *author, title, and genre*, **provides** the piece's *date* in parenthesis, **uses** some form of the verb *says (claims, asserts, suggests, argues*, aka "a rhetorically accurate verb) followed by *that*, and the piece's *thesis* (paraphrased or quoted).
2. **THE SECOND SENTENCE conveys the author's support for the thesis** (how the author develops the essay). The trick is to convey a good sense of the breadth of the author's support examples, usually in chronological order.
3. **THE THIRD SENTENCE analyzes the author's purpose** using an *in order to* statement.
4. **THE FOURTH SENTENCE describes** the essay's *target audience* and **characterizes** the author's relationship with that audience – and addresses the essay's *tone*.

Here is a rubric I might use to evaluate your précis:

Sentence 1:

- _____ Author, title, & year all accurate
- _____ Verb choice before the 'that'
- _____ Thesis accurately communicated
- _____ Thesis thoroughly communicated

Sentence 2:

- _____ Breadth of support is covered
- _____ Exemplary specifics chosen
- _____ Reveals/understands author's organizational structure

Sentence 3:

- _____ Clause before 'in order to' focuses on author's rhetorical choices (**what** is writer doing)
- _____ Clause after 'in order to' shows insight & sophistication (**why** writer is doing what you said before the 'in order to')

Sentence 4:

- _____ States obvious audience/tone based on publishing information
- _____ Shows deeper insight into audience/tone - building on assertions in Sentences 1,2, & 3.

Overall:

- _____ Understanding and insight of the reading and its rhetorical choices
- _____ Mature, academic voice
- _____ Bibliographic Entry
- _____ Mechanics (zero errors should be your goal)

Rhetorical Précis Writing: Exempla

BASIC: In Dave Barry's essay "The Ugly Truth about Beauty" (1998), he satirizes the ways **that** women unnecessarily obsess about their physical appearances. Barry develops his ideas by juxtaposing men's perceptions of their looks with women's, contrasting male and female role models, and comparing men's interests with women's. Using examples from popular culture, he exaggerates and stereotypes these differences **in order to** poke fun at a social norm and encourage women to rethink their acceptance of these social expectations. Barry opens and closes the essay by directly addressing men ("If you're a man...") and offering to give them advice, but his actual **audience** is both men and women, whom he addresses with a warm but mocking **tone**. *Word Count: 116*

ADVANCED: In the essay "The Ugly Truth about Beauty" (1998), Dave Barry, nationally known humorist, argues **that** "...women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do" (4) and in the process become unnecessarily and unrealistically concerned with their appearances. Barry illuminates this discrepancy by juxtaposing men's perceptions of their looks ("average-looking") with women's ("not good enough"), by contrasting male role models (He-Man, Buzz-Off) with female role models (Barbie, Cindy Crawford), and by comparing men's interests (the Super Bowl, lawn care) with women's (manicures). Using examples from popular culture (the Oprah show, Brad Pitt), he exaggerates and stereotypes these differences **in order to** prevent women from so eagerly accepting society's expectation of them; in fact, Barry claims that men who want women to "look like Cindy Crawford" are "idiots" (10). Barry's ostensible **audience** is men because he opens and closes the essay by directly addressing men ("If you're a man...") and offering to give them "advice" in a mockingly conspiratorial **tone**; however, by using humor to poke fun at both men and women's perceptions of themselves, Barry makes his essay palatable to both genders and hopes to convince women to stop obsessively "thinking they need to look like Barbie" (8). *Word count: 205*

Barry, Dave. "The Ugly Truth about Beauty." *Mirror on America: Short Essays and Images from Popular Culture*. 2nd ed. Eds. Joan T. Mims and Elizabeth M. Nollen. NY: Bedford, 2003. 109-12

Here is a list of verbs you might find helpful. It is by no means a required or exhaustive list. Always strive to employ the most connotatively precise words you can.

*adjures advances advises asks asserts begs beseeches cajoles cheers chimes commands
complains confides conveys counsels crows declares decrees decries demands describes dictates
directs discloses divulges elucidates employs encourages entreats espouses exclaims exhorts
explains gripes groans grouses grumbles hails hints illustrates implies implores inquires
insinuates instructs intimates invokes justifies laments mandates mocks muses orders pleads
ponders pontificates proclaims pronounces proposes queries rationalizes recommends recounts
relates reports requests reveals sighs sings snarls sneers states submits suggests summons wails
whimpers whines wields wonders*

