

Precis Assignments

[Fall 2014]

1. A precis (pronounced pray-see) is a short abstract or summary of a passage, article, report, book, and so on. *It is not a personal interpretation of a work or your opinion about the work.* Rather, it is a miniature version of the work. In this respect, a precis serves a more limited function than taking notes on a lecture or reading. (See www.PhilosophersToolkit.com for information on taking notes.)
2. How much should a precis reduce a work? That depends. Shafer-Landau wrote a 300 page book, *Moral Realism*. He published a precis of his book in the journal *Philosophical Studies* which was only 6 pages. You typically have a page limit and do what you can.
3. Some people say that a precis should be a miniaturization of the *entire* work, chapter, section etc. But for our purposes, I do not generally want you to try for a miniaturization of an entire work, chapter or section. I will ask you to write a precis of pieces that are too complex to miniaturize in the space provided. Rather, I want you to get at the *heart* of the selection, even if this means leaving out a number of things which, though possibly interesting, are secondary. You are graded largely on your ability to get at this heart.
4. Your precis should not generally include direct quotations. You should put things into your own words. The exception is that you should scrupulously explain and make use of special or technical terms employed by the author.
5. For your precis, you should usually seek out the following information, though some articles or chapters might require different treatment:
 - (a) The author's thesis: the main point the author is making. If there are several equally major points, you might talk about all of them, or, given your space restrictions, you might have to select what you take to be the most important one or two.
 - (b) Explanation of any key terms and distinctions used by the author relevant to the part you are summarizing.
 - (c) Any background assumptions made by the author.
 - (d) How the author defends his or her thesis. This can often be stated formally as an argument, that is, with premises listed and numbered. This is often the most important part of the matter.
 - (e) How the author deals with objections to his or her position or argument.
6. Now, it might be that you do not have space to do all this in the space provided.

7. It is your job to figure out how to generate a valuable precis with those page limits.

Here is a typical statement for how to go about writing a precis. I got it from the Saint Cloud University Website.¹ Note that the author of this piece emphasizes a rather long process involving multiple readings of a text. I myself often read a single text two or more times. You have to judge your own time. Also, you have to keep in mind that these instructions, valuable as they are, must be molded for particular assignments for various classes and disciplines

Process For Writing a Summary

Read with the Writer's Purpose in Mind

- Read the article carefully, making **no** notes or marks and looking only for what the writer is saying.
- After you're finished reading, write down in one sentence the point that is made about the subject. Then look for the writer's thesis and underline it.
 - Does this thesis correspond with the sentence you wrote down? If not, adjust your sentence or reconsider the thesis you selected.
 - Look at the article again and ask yourself if your view is slanted toward one of the essay's minor points. If it is, adjust your sentence so that it is slanted toward the writer's major point.

Underline with Summarizing in Mind

- Once you clearly understand the writer's major point (or purpose) for writing, read the article again. This time underline the major points supporting the thesis; these should be words or phrases here and there rather than complete sentences.
- In addition, underline key transitional elements which show how parts are connected. Omit specific details, examples, description, and unnecessary explanations. **Note:** you may need to go through the article twice in order to pick up everything you need.

Writing Your Summary

- Now begin writing your summary. Start with a sentence naming the writer and article title and stating the essay's main idea. Then write your summary, omitting nothing important and striving for overall coherence through appropriate transitions.
- Be concise, using coordination and subordination to compress ideas.
- Conclude with a final statement reflecting the significance of the article -- not from your own point of view but from the writer's.
- Throughout the summary, do **not** insert your own opinions or thoughts; instead summarize what the writer has to say about the subject.

¹ <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/summary.html>, last accessed 12/30/2008.

Revising Your Summary

- After you've completed a draft, read your summary and check for accuracy.
 - Does your summary make the same point as the article?
 - Have you omitted anything important?
 - Does your summary read smoothly with all parts clearly related?
- Keep in mind that a summary should generally be no more than one-fourth the length of the original. If your summary is too long, cut out words rather than ideas. Then look for non-essential information and delete it.
- Write another draft -- still a draft for revision -- and ask someone to read it critically.
 - Can that person understand the sense of the article by reading your summary?
 - Ask for criticism; then weigh these criticisms and make valid changes.

Editing Your Summary

- Correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors, looking particularly for those common in your writing.
- Write a clean draft and proofread for copying errors.