

PRECIS WRITING AND COMPREHENSION

Précis Writing

What is a précis?

Definition

Précis, from the Old French and literally meaning “cut short”, is a concise summary of an article or other work. The précis, then, explains the main point, logical support, and structure of the original work but in greatly condensed form. The précis is objective, unlike a critical analysis, which evaluates the argument and use of evidence within an article. Thus, the précis does not offer evaluations about a text, nor does it include personal reaction to a text. A précis is a concise summary of some other written work, and it should demonstrate your understanding of the original text while also conveying the meaning of that text to your own readers. In most cases, a précis summarizes the reading within one paragraph varying in length between 100 and 200 words. The information you provide in the précis should be brief and to the point. Write the précis in present tense and maintain that tense throughout the paragraph. You should also use active voice instead of passive voice.

How to write a précis? The process

- Read and annotate the article or other text.
- Reflect on the author's purpose.
- Consider the kinds of evidence the author uses.
- Restate the author's thesis in your own words.
- Write a one or two sentence summary of each section or subdivision of the article.
- Reread the article to compare it with your summary notes.
- Begin writing, using your paraphrase of the thesis and your one or two sentence summary statements.
- Review your précis to confirm that you have explained the main point of the article, identified the supporting evidence that the writer uses, and have used the same logical structure as the text.
- Finally, check for clarity, coherence, and correctness.

How should a précis be structured?

Introduction

Some writers explain the author's broad topic; and then restate the author's thesis, while others may open with a restatement of the author's thesis and then explain the broader framework of the subject. In either format, the restatement of the thesis should include the name of the author, the title of the article, and the date of its publication, as the following illustrates: "In his influential 1936 essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," J.R.R. Tolkien criticizes scholars of this day.

Body Paragraphs

Generally, each body paragraph should explain a separate section of the text and should provide the evidence (though in greatly condensed form) that the writer has used to support that section. If used, quotations should be brief, should be correctly introduced or incorporated, and should be correctly attributed.

Conclusion

The conclusion should restate the main idea of the text and reiterate the main support. Remember to avoid any personal statements about the text. Ideally, you should not include any direct quotation within the précis. Summarize the original text and related information in your own words.

PRÉCIS WRITING

The word précis is derived from French that means summary and précis writing means the art of summarizing. Précis writing is one of the most useful skills you can acquire for your work both as a student and as a professional. Précis writing involves summarizing a document to extract the maximum amount of information, then conveying this information to a reader in minimum words.

Definition: A précis is a clear, compact logical summary of a passage. It preserves only the essential or important ideas of the original.

ACCORDING TO OXFORD DICTIONARY)

"It is a short version of a speech or a piece of writing that gives the main points of ideas."

ACCORDING TO CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY

"Prices is a short form of the text which briefly gives only the important parts."

QUALITIES OF A GOOD PRÉCIS

A good précis shows the writing skills of a person. It must have the following qualities.

1. Clarity

Clarity means getting your message across so that the receiver can understand what the writer is trying to convey. It is the basic and essential need of a précis. The ideas should be clear and understandable. There should not be any ambiguity in your writing. The writer can achieve clarity by using simple language and simple structure. If your précis is not understandable to the reader it will lose its importance and meanings for the reader.

2. Correctness

Mistakes in your writings always irritate the reader. Of course mistakes are never intentional; even so there is no excuse for them. At the time of writing or composing a précis the writer must ensure that the facts and figures are correct. Structure of sentences and spellings of words must be correct because a single mistake in structure and spelling may spoil the message. We may consider the mistakes under the following headings:

- Misspelled words
- Mistakes in figures and dates
- Mistakes in punctuation
- Mistakes of grammar and structure

3. Objectivity

Objectivity means the ability to present or view facts uncolored by feelings, opinions and personal bias. While making a précis, the writer should adopt an objective approach. He should not give and add his personal opinion and ideas in a précis. A précis should be purely a summary of the original text without any addition.

4. Coherence

Coherence means the logical and clear interconnection of ideas in a written piece of work. A good précis should be coherent. The ideas which are presented in a précis must have a logical connection and they all should be interrelated. In short we may say that the ideas should be well knitted so that the writer may not be confused and lose his interest.

5. Completeness

Another striking feature of a good précis is completeness. A précis should be complete in all respects. Completeness means that the writer should include all the important facts in a précis. To make it short he should not omit the important ideas.

This mistake on the part of the writer will spoil the importance and meaning of the précis.

6. Conciseness

Conciseness is a desirable quality of a good précis. Conciseness means to say all that needs to be said and no more. The writer should write what is necessary and avoid writing unnecessary details. A concise piece of work conveys the message in the fewest possible words. But one point must be kept in mind that the writer should not omit some basic and essential facts to achieve conciseness. To achieve conciseness, notice the following suggestions:

- Omitting unnecessary details
- Eliminate wordy expressions
- Include only relevant material
- Avoid unnecessary repetition

RULES OF MAKING A PRÉCIS

A well written précis should be a serviceable substitute for the original work. The goal of a précis is to preserve the core essence of the work in a manner that is both clear and concise. While writing a précis, the writer should follow the below given rules to make it an effective piece of work.

Read Carefully

First read the passage twice or thrice carefully to summarize it. This will enable you to understand the main theme of the passage.

Underlining

Underline and mark the important ideas and essential points from the original text.

Outline

With the help of underlined ideas, draw the outline of your précis.

Omission

Omit all the unnecessary information or the long phrases which could be replaced by one word. All the adjectives and the adverbs can also be omitted in order to make a good précis.

Don't Omit

While making a précis, the writer should never omit the important points and ideas which are essential to be described.

Size

Keep the fact in your mind that the length of the précis should be the one third of the original passage.

Indirect Speech

A précis should be written in indirect speech. If there is direct speech in the passage, it should be changed into indirect speech.

Tense and Person

It should be written in the third person and past tense. In the case of universal truth the present tense should be used.

Own Words

A précis should be written in your own words and the writer should abstain from borrowing words from the original passage.

Précis of a Dialogue

The précis of a dialogue or conversation should always be expressed in form of narrative.

Objective Approach

A précis writer should adopt an objective approach. He should not add his personal ideas to a précis. Put all the important points and ideas in a logical order.

One Paragraph

There could be two or more paragraphs in the original text. While making the précis, try to write all the ideas in one paragraph.

Rough Draft

After omitting all the unnecessary ideas, the writer should prepare a rough draft to finalize it.

Final Draft

Having read the rough draft and pointed out some mistakes which may be found in the rough draft, the writer can prepare the final draft.

SOLVED EXERCISE**Passage**

Read the following passage and answer the question given at the end:

A life of action and danger moderates the dread of death. It not only gives us fortitude to bear pain, but teaches us at every step the precarious tenure on which we hold our present being. Sedentary and studious men are the most apprehensive on this score. Dr. Johnson was an instance in point. A few years seemed to him soon over, compared with those sweeping contemplations on time and infinity with which he had been used to pose himself. In the still life of a man of letters there was no obvious reason for a change. He might sit in an arm chair and pour out cups of tea to all eternity would it had been possible for him to do so. The most rational cure after all for the inordinate fear of death is to set a just value on life. If we mere wish to continue on the scene to indulge our head-strong humour and tormenting passions, we had better be gone at once,; and if we only cherish a fondness for existence according to the good we desire from it, the pang we feel at parting which it will not be very server.

Questions:

1. Suggest a suitable title for the passage.

2. What type of people are afraid of death and why?
3. How can we get rid of the fear of death?
4. What idea do you form about Dr. Johnson from this passage?
5. Explain the meanings of the words written in bold types.
6. Make a précis of the passage.

SOLUTION

i) Suitable Title: The fear of death.

ii) People who spend much time sitting and studying are the most afraid of death. Because they lead a peaceful life and want no change.

iii) The most sensible way of getting rid of the fear of death is to value life properly. We should know that our hold upon life is very risky and that we may die any moment.

iv) From this passage we learn that Dr. Johnson was afraid of death. He led a peaceful life and wanted no change. He was fond of tea.

v) Explanation of the meanings of words;

Precarious Tenure — Uncertain period, life

Inordinate fear — Unreasonable fear, fear of death.

vi) Summary or précis.

If we lead an active life facing dangers, we will less fear death. People, who lead a lazy and peaceful life, are the most afraid of death. The most sensible way of getting rid of the fear of death is to value life properly. If we do not give unnecessary importance to our life, we will not feel the pang of death.

Sample 1

It is physically impossible for a well-educated, intellectual, or brave man to make money the chief object of his thoughts just as it is for him to make his dinner the principal object of them. All healthy people like their dinners, but their dinner is not the main object of their lives. So all healthy minded people like making money ought to like it and enjoy the sensation of winning it; it is something better than money.

A good soldier, for instance, mainly wishes to do his fighting well. He is glad of his pay—very properly so and justly grumbles when you keep him ten years without it—till, his main mission of life is to win battles, not to be paid for winning them. So of clergymen. The clergyman's object is essentially baptize and preach not to be paid for preaching. So of doctors. They like fees no doubt—ought to like them; yet if they are brave and well-educated the entire object to their lives is not fees. They on the whole, desire to cure the sick; and if they are good doctors and the choice were fairly to them, would rather cure their patient and lose their fee

than kill him and get it. And so with all the other brave and rightly trained men: their work is first, their fee second—very important always; but still second.

The Main Points:

1. Money making is a common attraction in life.
2. But it cannot be the principal aim of well-educated, intellectual brave persons.

Precis Summary:

Money-making is a common attraction in life. But it cannot be the principal aim of well educated, cultured and brave man. A brave soldier prizes honour and victory more than his pay. A good clergyman is more interested in the moral welfare of his people than his returns. A doctor (good) values the care of his patient far more than his fees. Thus with all the well-educated, intellectual persons, their work is first, money next.

Sample 2

Home is the young, who known "nothing of the world and who would be forlorn and sad, if thrown upon it. It is providential, shelter of the weak and inexperienced, who have to learn as yet to cope with the temptations which lies outside of it. It is the place of training of those who are not only ignorant, but have no yet learnt how to learn, and who have to be taught by careful individual trail, how to set about profiting by the lessons of teacher. And it is the school of elementary studies—not of advances, for such studies alone can make master minds. Moreover, it is the shrine of our best affections, the bosom of our fondest recollections, at spell upon our after life, a stay for world weary mind and soul; wherever we are, till the end comes. Such are attributes or offices of home, and like to these, in one or other sense or measure, are the attributes and offices of a college in a university.

Precis Summary

Home shelters the young who are weak and inexperienced and unable to face the temptations in life. It is a centre of their elementary education and a nursery of sweet affections and pleasant memories. Its magic lasts for ever. A weary mind turn to it for rest. Such is the function of a home and in some measure of the university.

Sample 3

Teaching is the noblest of professions. A teacher has a sacred duty to perform. It is he on whom rests the responsibility of moulding the character of young children. Apart from developing their intellect, he can inculcate in them qualities of good citizenship, remaining neat and clean, talking decently and sitting properly. These virtues are not easy to be imbibed. Only he who himself leads a life of simplicity, purity and rigid discipline can successfully cultivate these habits in his pupils. Besides a teacher always remain young. He may grow old in age, but not in spite. Perpetual contact with budding youths keeps him happy and cheerful. There are

moments when domestic worries weigh heavily on his mind, but the delightful company of innocent children makes him overcome his transient moods of despair.

Precis Summary

Teaching is the noblest profession. A teacher himself leading a simple, pure and disciplined life can mould the character of the young children and make them neat and good mannered citizens. Besides he remains every young forgetting his own domestic worries in the constant company of the young.

Sample 4

English education and English language have done immense goods to India, inspite of their glaring drawbacks. The notions of democracy and self-government are the born of English education. Those who fought and died for mother India's freedom were nursed in the cradle of English thought and culture. The West has made contribution to the East. The history of Europe has fired the hearts of our leaders. Our struggle for freedom has been inspired by the struggles for freedom in England, America and France. If our leaders were ignorant of English and if they had not studied this language, how could they have been inspired by these heroic struggles for freedom in other lands? English, therefore, did us great good in the past and if properly studied will do immense good in future.

English is spoken throughout the world. For international contact our commerce and trade, for the development of our practical ideas, for the scientific studies, English-is indispensable "English is very rich in literature," our own literature has been made richer by this foreign language. It will really be a fatal day if we altogether forget Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Shaw.

Precis Summary

Notwithstanding its various defects English education has done great good to India. The ideas of democracy and self-government are its gifts. Nursed on English education the Indian leaders were inspired by the Western thought, culture and freedom struggles. They fought for and won their motherland's freedom. Being spoken thought-out the world English is necessary for international contact, trade, commerce and science. English is rich in literature; its master mind cannot be neglected.

Sample 5

When we survey our lives and efforts we soon observe that almost the whole of our actions and desires are bound up with the existence of other human beings. We notice that whole nature resembles that of the social animals. We eat food that others have produced, wear clothes that others have made, live in houses that others have built. The greater part of our knowledge and beliefs has been passed on to us by other people though the medium of a language which others have created. Without language and mental capacities, we would have been poor indeed comparable to higher animals.

We have, therefore, to admit that we owe our principal knowledge over the least to the fact of living in human society. The individual if left alone from birth would remain primitive and beast like in his thoughts and feelings to a degree that we can hardly imagine. The individual is what he is and has the significance that he has, not much in virtue of the individuality, but rather as a member of a great human community, which directs his material and spiritual existence from the cradle to grave.

Precis Summary

Being social animals, human beings have their actions and desires bound up with society. In matter of food, clothes, knowledge and belief they are interdependent. They use language created by others. Without language their mental power would not grow. They are superior to beast, because they live in human society. An individual life left alone from birth would grow utterly beast like. So human society and not individuality guides man's material and spiritual existence.

COMPREHENSION

A comprehension test is based on a short passage or article. A student who has to answer the comprehension questions has to understand and grasp the meaning of the passage or article. The understanding power and level of the student is evaluated in a comprehension test. Hence it is important for students to read the comprehension carefully first and then only answer the questions. The passage or article has to be understood perfectly well before questions are answered.

- **Instructions To Be Read With Extra Care**

While reading instructions, always take extra care. At times, the questions are tricky leading the student to misunderstand or miss out important points. Consider the context of the answer first. All questions which you know should be answered first. You can eliminate questions you are not too sure about.

- **First Read The Questions**

Make it a habit to go through the questions first. This will help you to look for relevant answers while reading the passage. Process of fetching answers can be hastened by doing this. If the passage is read first and then the questions, the chances of losing time are more as you will be reading everything again.

- **Check Marks Allotted To Each Question**

There is no point in dedicating too much time on a question that is worth very few marks. Make sure that questions with more marks are answered first and then quickly finish off the ones with the least marks.

- **Allocate Appropriate Time**

You will have to note down the time required for answering every question and accordingly stick to that time, so that all the questions can be attempted in due time.

- **Highlighting Keywords**

Once you have read the questions and have started reading the passage, make sure you highlight any headings, phrases, keywords etc that can help in answering the questions. This method will help you save a lot of time, searching through the passage again.

- **Avoid Copying Text Directly**

While writing down the answers you should not copy chunks of text directly.

- **Review What You Have Written**

To check for avoidable mistakes you must review the paper again at least twice once you are done with answering the questions. If sentences have to be reframed or corrected, then this can be done. In case of answering multiple choice questions, and in case of doubt, importance to reviewing must be given.

- **Use Quotation Marks Wherever Necessary**

Quotation marks will have to be used if at all you will be making use of quotations from the passage. This also carries marks, so make sure you don't forget them quotation marks.

- **Avoid Using Any Knowledge From Outside The Passage**

Make sure the comprehension is read at least twice. While answering the questions, the answers have to be from what is given in the passage itself as outside knowledge is not entertained in a comprehension. Avoid any answer that is not supported by relevant information from the passage or article or they will be rendered as incorrect.

If these few important points and techniques are kept in mind then you will surely be able to attempt the examination and comprehension well and in the process score good marks.