

THE PRECIS

UWF Writing Lab

Excerpted from Harry Shaw, *A Complete Course in Freshman English* (8th ed.), Harper & Row.

A precis (form both singular and plural, pronounced “pray—see”) is a brief summary of the essential thought of a longer composition. It attempts to provide a miniature of the original selection, reproducing the same proportions on smaller scale, the same ideas, and the same mood and tone, so far as possible. The writer of a precis cannot interpret or comment; his or her sole function is to give a reduced photograph of the original author’s exact and essential meaning. Nor can he or she omit important details. Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare*, for example, is not really a series of precis, because from the originals have been deleted some important subplots as well as all that was thought unfit for children.

Instructors frequently require precis in both oral and written form because they realize how effective the summarized method is in developing students’ capacities for “careful reading” and “constructive thinking.” English teachers often assign as a theme topic the making of a precis of some selected passage because they realize the importance of teaching “exact writing.” The composition of a good precis is difficult, therefore, because careful reading, constructive thinking, and exact writing require time and effort.

In constructing a precis, follow these suggestions:

1. Select carefully the material to be condensed. Some selections can be reduced satisfactorily, but others are so tightly knit that condensation is virtually impossible. You can make precis of novels, short stories, speeches, or essays, but do not select material the style of which is especially compact and epigrammatic. Avoid material which has already been summarized, edited, or abridged; “continual distillation” cannot accurately indicate the essential thought of the original composition.
2. Read the selection carefully. The major purpose of a precis is to present faithfully, as briefly and clearly as possible, the important ideas of the selection being “cut down.” In order to grasp the central ideas, you must read carefully, analytically, and reflectively. Look up the meanings of all words and phrases about which you are in doubt. Do not skim, but look for important or key expressions. Before starting to write, you must, to use Sir Francis Bacon’s phrase, “chew and digest” the selection, not merely “taste” it or “swallow” it whole in a single gulp. You must see how the material has been organized, what devices the writer has used, what kinds of illustrations support the main thought. You must be sure to distinguish fact and opinion, and you will want to question critically the writer’s statements. These suggestions are, of course, those which you would ordinarily follow every time that you attempt to read and to think as intelligently as you can.
3. Use your own words. Quoting sentences—perhaps topic sentences—from each paragraph results in a sentence outline, not a precis. You must use your own words for the most part, although a little quotation is permissible. Ordinarily, the phrasing of the original will not be suitable for your purposes. Once you have mastered the thought of the selection, your problem is one of original composition. You are guided and aided by the order and wording of the material, but the precis itself represents your own analysis and statement of the main thought.
4. Do not use too many words. Nothing of real importance can be omitted, but you must remember that the central aim of a precis is condensation. The length of a condensation cannot arbitrarily be determined, but it is safe to say that most prose can be reduced by two-thirds to two-fourths. Some verse is so compact that it can hardly be condensed at all; other verse can be shortened far more than most good prose.
5. Do not alter the plan of the original. Follow the logical order of the original so that the condensation will be accurate. Thoughts and facts should not be rearranged; if they are, the essence of the original may be

distorted. Give attention to proportion. Try to preserve as much as possible of the mood and tone of the original.

6. Write the precis in good English. The condensation should not be a jumble of disconnected words and faulty sentences. It should be a model of exact and emphatic diction and clear, effective sentence construction because it must be intelligible to a reader who has not seen the original. Transition from sentence to sentence must be smooth and unobtrusive, emphasizing the unity of the summarization. The precis is not often likely to be so well written as the original, but it should read smoothly and possess compositional merit of its own.

The following are precis made by students. Criticize them in terms of the suggestions given above.

ORIGINAL

For a hundred years and more, the monarchy in France had been absolute and popular. It was beginning now to lose both power and prestige. A sinister symptom of what was to follow appeared when the higher ranks of society began to lose their respect for the sovereign. It started when Louis XV selected as his principal mistress a member of the middle class; it continued when he chose her successor from the streets. When the feud between Madame Du Barry and the Duke de Choiseul ended in the dismissal of the Minister, the road to Chanteloup, his country house, was crowded with carriages, while familiar faces were absent from the court at Versailles. For the first time in French history, the followers of fashion flocked to do honor to a fallen favorite. People wondered at the time, but hardly understood the profound significance of the event. The king was no longer the leader of society. Kings and presidents, prime ministers and dictators provide at all times a target for the criticism of philosophers, satirists, and reformers. Such criticism they can usually afford to neglect, but when the time-servers, the sycophants, and the courtiers begin to disregard them, then should the strongest of them tremble on their thrones. (208 words)

—Duff Cooper, “Talleyrand”

PRECIS

For more than a hundred years, the monarchy in France had been absolute and popular. But Louis XV lost the respect of the upper ranks of society by choosing his mistresses from lower classes. When the feud of the Duke de Choiseul with Madame Du Barry resulted in the Minister’s dismissal, the court turned its attention to him, away from the king. The king, no longer the leader of society, could well tremble for his throne. (76 words)

ORIGINAL

But as for the bulk of mankind, they are clearly devoid of any degree of taste. It is a quality in which they advance very little beyond a state of infancy. The first thing a child is fond of in a book is a picture, the second is a story, and the third a jest. Here then is the true Pons Asinorum, which very few readers ever get over. (69 words) —Henry Fielding

PRECIS

Most people lack taste; they remain childlike. Readers, like children, rarely ever get over the “bridge of asses” constituted by pictures, stories, and jokes. (24 words)