

Native Articles: Writing Rhetorical Précis

Directions: Using the 3 articles selected above, write a précis for each article.

What is a précis?

In a four sentence format, the rhetorical précis offers a short account of an article, essay, or resource that does more than summarize its content.

How do I write a précis?

Sentence 1: Name of author, [optional: a phrase describing the author], the genre and title of the work, date in parentheses, a rhetorically accurate verb (such as “asserts,” “argues,” “suggests,” “implies,” “claims,” etc.) and a THAT clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) of the article or essay.

Sentence 2: An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis, usually in chronological order.

Sentence 3: A statement of the author’s apparent purpose, followed by an “in order” phrase indicating the change the author wants to effect in the audience.

Sentence 4: A description of the intended audience and the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

What does a précis look like?

Sample: 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).

Explanation of the example

Notice that Woodworth’s example follows the pattern exactly. The first sentence identifies the author (Baker), the genre (essay), the title and date, and uses an active verb (asserts) and the relative pronoun that to explain what exactly Baker asserts. The second sentence explains the first sentence by offering chronological examples from Baker’s essay, while the third sentence suggests the author’s purpose and WHY (in order to) he has set out that purpose (or seems to have set out that purpose—not all essays are explicit about this information and readers have to put the pieces together). The final sentence identifies the primary audience of the essay (college students) and suggests how this audience is brought into/connected to the essay’s purpose.