



The Rhetorical Précis

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Rhetoric Review, Vol. 7, No. 1. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 156-164.

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The Rhetorical Précis

During the past five years, we have seen a rapid growth in interdisciplinary writing instruction, which operates on the fundamental principle that “writing is inextricably bound up with learning in the arts and sciences” (Maimon 70). Writing teachers who are committed to this principle, but who work on campuses where no formal program exists, must face on their own the challenge of “exemplifying how writers and scholars behave and by giving them opportunities to practice making connections between writing and learning” (Maimon 70).

To meet this challenge, I have developed a technique called the rhetorical précis, which can be used by individual teachers both to reinforce the learning in their own courses and to further the specific goals in interdisciplinary writing instruction: helping students learn to read and listen to what others have to say with greater comprehension, to question and evaluate what they read and hear, and to write and speak with control and conviction—in our own classes, in other classes, and beyond the classroom.

It has long been recognized that summarizing significantly improves reading comprehension and recall (Stotsky 339). Recent research has shown furthermore that younger students “become better writers in general when they [engage in] daily practice in writing summaries” (D’Angelo 538). Summary writing, of course, helps students learn to abstract the main ideas in a unit of discourse; and few would dispute the benefits of this activity for students of any age. But college students need to go beyond simply summarizing information. They also need to be able to evaluate the credibility of their sources and to evaluate the new information in relation to what they already believe. They need to assess the rhetorical strategy of the author, the form of the discourse, the author’s purpose or hidden agenda, and the nature of the audience being addressed. To lift information out of its rhetorical context is potentially dangerous; to do so perpetuates the myth that whatever is in print is true, and it further isolates student writers from the authors who are speaking to them.

Focusing on information at the expense of other rhetorical features tends, furthermore, to contradict much of what process-centered writing instruction attempts to instill: namely, that all writing occurs in a context and involves a number of choices. Student writers must be able to identify

the choices other writers make if they are to learn that every written product is the result of one human being, in a specific time and place, choosing to say something, in a particular way, to other human beings, for some purpose.

The rhetorical précis is so named because it acknowledges the rhetorical situation in which any discourse occurs, implicitly emphasizing the human responsibility involved both in writing and in interacting with a text. The rhetorical précis form is a highly structured four-sentence paragraph that records the essential rhetorical elements of a unit of spoken or written discourse, including the name of the speaker/writer, the context of the delivery, the major assertion, the mode of development and/or support, the stated and/or apparent purpose, and the relationship established between the speaker/writer and the audience. Each of the four sentences requires specific information; students are also encouraged to use brief quotations to convey a sense of style and tone. Once students have mastered the form, they are heartily encouraged to create other, less rigid forms to accommodate the information.

The Rhetorical Précis Form

1. Name of author, [optional: a phrase describing author], genre and title of work, date in parentheses (additional publishing information in parentheses or note); a rhetorically accurate verb (such as “assert,” “argue,” “suggest,” “imply,” “claim,” etc.); and a THAT clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) of the work.
2. An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis, usually in chronological order.
3. A statement of the author’s apparent purpose, followed by an “in order” phrase.
4. A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

A finished précis on a typical reading assignment for a college writing course reads as follows:

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).

From *The Complete Stylist*, 1966; in *Elements of the Essay: A Reader for College Writers*. Ed. H. Wendell Smith (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981), 55-57.

This précis was written collectively by a group of four students in a freshman composition course during the second day of instruction on précis writing. The processes required to complete this assignment included reading and rereading, writing and rewriting. Students returned to the text, tried writing a sentence, crossed out words and phrases, rewrote sentences. They were actively engaged in the learning process. Within a week, they were able to write précis on their own.

The processes involved in précis writing help students develop as language users. The reading and rereading accelerate acquisition of the written language system (see Falk, Kroll, Krashen); the extensive writing and rewriting accelerate learning by providing guided practice in a variety of writing tasks such as thesis formation, sentence structuring (e.g., subordination and parallel construction), punctuation, word choice, and even techniques of documentation.

Teaching Strategies

Teaching the rhetorical précis complements the normal activities of courses in both composition and literature. I am inclined to think that any sensitive and patient teacher can devise a good strategy for getting students started. After five years of experimenting, however, I have discovered what I consider to be essential steps in introducing the form. First, students need to understand its purpose: to give as much information about the discourse as possible in four sentences. It helps to remind students that the précis answers the basic *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *how*, *why*, and *to whom* about the rhetorical situation of the discourse. Second, with college freshmen, it's best to teach each of the four sentences separately, using class discussion

or small group discussions of an essay that all students have read to work through the first one or two *précis*. When students first start writing, each sentence, with its specific demands, requires guided practice, response, revision, and more revision.

The first sentence is probably the most difficult. Explaining the different rhetorical strategies that an author may use, for example, requires defining the differences between an assertion and an argument. Students tend to use more general words such as "writes" and "states." The *THAT* clause is designed to demand a complete statement: a grammatical subject (the topic of the essay) and predicate (the claim that is made about that topic). If the *THAT* is not required, students will use "about" and "how" to slip out from under stating the thesis: i.e., "Sheridan Baker writes about attitudes in writing" or "... states how attitudes affect writing," neither of which reports what he claims to be true about attitudes.

The second sentence is less structured. Sometimes it works best to report the order of development: "The author develops this assertion first, by applying these techniques to two poems; second, by providing definitions; and third, by explaining the history of each approach." A more general statement may also work in the second sentence: "The author develops this idea by comparing and contrasting the lives of these two Civil War heroes." In works of literature, the second sentence may provide a short plot summary: "Hemingway develops this idea through a sparse narrative about the 'initiation' of a young boy who observes in one night both a birth and a death."

The third sentence sometimes inadvertently restates the thesis: "The author's purpose is to prove that . . ." It helps to remind students that one purpose is always to put forward a thesis, but there are others as well. The "in order to" phrase keeps students from falling back on "Her purpose is to inform," and requires that they look beyond to assess what the author wanted the audience to do or to feel as a result of reading the work.

In the fourth sentence, students will begin by writing that the audience is "anyone" or "the general public." They need to ask how the language of the work excludes certain audiences (nonspecialists would not understand the terminology; children would not understand the irony) in order to see that the author did make certain assumptions about the preknowledge of the audience. This sentence may also report the author's tone: "He establishes a distant tone by excessively using passive voice and by referring to himself as 'this author.'"

Because there is much to learn, grading early drafts of *précis* is counterproductive. After three or four *précis* have been worked through in class and revision strategies have been learned, students gradually gain

control over the form. However, they may become discouraged at first; for most of them, the *précis* is a new and much more difficult way of interacting with a text. It's a lot easier to memorize than to think.

Applications

Applications of this technique are limitless. During the early part of the course, it works well to assign two or three readings on a similar topic. After students have written their *précis*, they can compare the assertions of two or more authors, not only to sharpen critical thinking skills but also to begin to evaluate ideas and formulate their own values on the topic. This exercise can also serve to introduce research techniques.

Précis may also be extended in a number of ways. Each sentence may become a full paragraph, or the *précis* paragraph may serve as an introduction either to a personal or critical response or to a longer essay. The *précis* may be followed by an evaluation of what was said, helping students learn that they must give speakers and writers their due before agreeing or disagreeing with them. In literature courses, I have found it useful to restructure the fourth sentence to allow students to explain why a particular critical approach was helpful in interpreting the work. Students have suggested that relationships exist between traditional critical approaches to literature and the information in the *précis*; this idea is still under investigation.

When students are comfortable with the form, they can write *précis* of each other's essay drafts. This works well as a starting point for peer advising and editing; *précis* written by students on their own papers can help them assess their own work, as well. I have found that students like seeing their work critiqued in writing: "Beth Adams, in her essay 'Stop the Dam' (1983), argues that . . ." This puts them in the same game with the professionals they have been reading and clearly gives them a new sense of self-respect.

Another idea that has grown out of *précis* writing is the rhetorical proposal, a form that mirrors the *précis* but is written during the planning stages of writing, before the essay itself. It begins, "I propose to assert that . . ." and provides answers to the basic *précis* questions. This sort of contextual prewriting allows both teachers and students to see at a glance if the paper is well conceived, thereby eliminating a multitude of false starts.

Moving On

After mastering and applying the rhetorical *précis* form in the composition classroom, students are ready for an intermediate step that will

prepare them to use the form in their other courses. First, I assign a précis on any 2-3 page article of the student's choice from a current magazine or journal and ask that a photocopy of the article be turned in with the précis. Students read each other's articles and précis in class, provide feedback, revise and edit, and turn in their précis for evaluation. (This, by the way, is the only time that précis grading is time-consuming; the teacher needs to read the article to comment on the précis.)

One useful follow-up assignment is to ask students to find additional articles in the library on the same topic and write additional précis. They might also be asked to conduct interviews and conversations on the topic, recording each of these rhetorical situations in précis form. Again, critical thinking skills develop as students weigh divergent points of view. In addition, the research techniques that they are learning will serve them in other courses.

To encourage students to develop the habit of précis writing (and précis thinking) in all their courses, I assign a variety of outside précis throughout the second half of the term on textbook chapters or sections, on class lectures (they practice in my class), on campus lectures or dramatic productions, on television programs, and on conversations. Near the end of the course, they write an extended précis on the whole course to help prepare for the final examination.

Assessments

Before turning to the results of an informal field test that was conducted to evaluate rhetorical précis writing, I would like to report my own assessment of this technique in teaching composition. First, the practical advantages. With few exceptions, a teacher's grading time is decreased considerably; précis take less than a minute each to grade. Students, on the other hand, spend a considerable amount of time actively engaged with the text in order to write a précis. This puts the responsibility for learning squarely where it belongs: on the student. Ultimately, they save time too, in writing essays, in preparing research projects, and in reviewing vast amounts of reading in a number of courses. Students reported both in the field test and to me personally that even when précis were not assigned, they wrote them for their own use in comprehending difficult texts, preparing research papers, and reviewing for exams. I observed, in fact, that a good deal of transfer occurred during the last few weeks of the term, as students asked me to look at précis they had written on readings for other courses, on a school play, and on several movies. As the précis was used in the composition classroom to accelerate and reinforce learning, it

was also used in other courses and outside school to guide reading, writing, and thinking.

In addition to the practical benefits, there are more substantial rewards. When students write *précis*, they obviously have to read the assigned material. This alone leads to more active participation in class discussions. As students learn to read and listen critically, pinning down what a writer or speaker has argued, asserted, suggested, and so forth, they begin to question and challenge ideas, including their teachers'. They begin to perceive both reading and writing to be like other less formal discourse situations, where an audience responds, disagrees, applauds, or questions the speaker. The relationships between writing/speaking and reading/responding become much clearer to them. And as they are continually obligated to respond to what they read and hear, they become increasingly aware that their writing will evoke responses, as does their speaking and as does the writing and speaking of others. As a result, they become more responsible and more involved in their writing; their learning becomes their own. As William G. Perry has demonstrated, this represents a crucial step in their intellectual and ethical development.

Perhaps more important than my own observations are those of the 25 students who completed the composition course in which the rhetorical *précis* form was first used. In a field test conducted at Oglethorpe University in 1983, these students were asked to assess the usefulness of the technique, both in the composition course and in other courses. The method of the survey was a written response to the question, "How useful did you find the *précis* as an aid in learning?", followed by a questionnaire.

Of the written responses, 86% were highly positive, 10% somewhat positive, and 4% somewhat negative. Half of the respondents volunteered that once they had mastered the *précis* form, it saved them time in reading, in reviewing, and in research. Slightly over half reported that the form had been internalized and guided their reading and thinking, even when a *précis* was not required, and that the *précis* had helped them in other courses in understanding reading assignments and class lectures, writing reports, and writing term papers.

From the questionnaire assessing the effectiveness of *précis* writing in developing reading, thinking, and writing skills, the following results are most relevant:

- Reading:** 76% found understanding what they read "less difficult,"
76% found that they remembered what they read "much more easily."
Overall 80% rated *précis* writing as "highly useful" as a means to increasing reading comprehension.

- Thinking:** 80% found that précis writing helped "a great deal" in thinking critically about assigned reading in the composition course,
56% about assigned reading in other courses,
36% in comparing and assessing divergent opinions outside of school.
- Overall** 80% rated précis writing as "highly useful" as a means to becoming more critical thinkers.
- Writing:** 84% found that précis writing helped "a great deal" in writing papers for the composition course,
56% in writing papers for other courses,
68% in gaining control over their own writing,
80% in organizing long papers in composition and other courses,
44% in distinguishing between generalization and substantiation,
56% in writing mature sentence structures.
- Overall** 60% rated précis writing as highly useful as a means to improving writing skills,
36% somewhat useful.

Perhaps the most compelling results of this initial survey, compelling in part because they have been duplicated in subsequent surveys (University of Georgia, 1983 and 1985; Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 1986 and 1987), include the following: 84% of the respondents (78% in the 1987 VPI survey) reported using précis writing techniques in courses other than composition by the tenth week of a sixteen-week term; 92% (96% in 1987) believed that précis writing should be part of the college composition curriculum in the future; and 84% (82% in 1987) believed that it should be introduced in high school.

The findings of this small study are not conclusive, but they are suggestive. The surprising consistency of the results over a five-year period, and in a variety of academic settings, would indicate that this technique merits further study as a means to achieving the goals of interdisciplinary writing programs within the composition classroom.

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