

THE PRÉCIS

The précis is an orderly condensation of an original piece of writing that preserves the main thought, organization, and tone of the original. Writing a précis is valuable training in composition. Since the writing requires the student to be clear and concise, he must choose words carefully and arrange them skillfully to get the maximum amount of meaning into the minimum space.

Study the following facts about a précis and the basic steps of précis writing:

1. A précis is a short summary. It is not a paraphrase, which merely says in different and simpler words exactly what the piece of writing being paraphrased has to say. A paraphrase may be as long as the work itself. A précis rarely is more than one-third the length of the original selection and may be as short as one-fourth.

2. A précis gives only the "heart" of the passage. It omits repetitions and such details as examples, illustrations, and adjectives unless they are of unusual importance.

3. A précis is written entirely in the words of the person writing it, not in the words of the original selection. Avoid the temptation to lift long phrases and whole sentences from the original.

4. A précis is written from the point of view of the author whose work is being summarized. Do not begin with such expressions as "This author says" or "The paragraph means." Begin as though you were summarizing your own writing.

In writing a précis proceed as follows:

1. Read carefully, sentence by sentence, the passage to be summarized. Try to grasp the writer's main point. Try to find the TOPIC SENTENCE, if there is one expressed.

2. Express the author's main point in each paragraph in your own words. Do not use the wording of the original except for certain key words which you may find indispensable. Do not add any opinion or ideas of your own.

3. Usually you will find your précis is too long--more than one-third of the original. Continue your revision until you have reduced the précis to the proper length.

SAMPLE ARTICLE WITH PRÉCIS

"Football"

by Allison Danzig (from New York Times)

The coach does not always open up to the visiting reporter and acquaint him with the full potentialities of his new men. The tendency is rather to minimize their ability. The coach has a mortal fear of overconfidence in the squad. He particularly dreads the effect of too much publicity on his younger players. He does not like to have his team elevated to the position of favorite. It's a matter of psychology, and also he doesn't want to put himself on the spot. If his team or his players individually get a big build-up, the public and especially the alumni expect big things of them. If they don't come through, the criticism is all the more severe. It looks as though he has failed to make the most of his material, and he begins to worry about keeping his job.

So the coach would rather the reporter didn't say too many nice things about his squad until after the big game is won or the season is over. Then there is no danger of overconfidence and the pressure is off the men. You can't blame him for this attitude. Even when he has the markings of a great team, so many things can happen to wreck the season--the setting-in of overconfidence, the loss through injury or one of two key players, a missed signal, or the failure to throw a block on a vitally important play, the development of opponents, who may have just as good material and better luck.

(263 words)

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When talking to a reporter early in the season, a coach tends to talk down the abilities of his new men. He does not want his team to become known as a favorite because, if the team loses, he will be criticized for not making the most of his material. Even when he knows he has a great team, a coach avoids favorable publicity. He realizes that overconfidence, injuries, an error on the field, or the better luck of his opponents may wreck any season.

(85 words)