

# Rhetorical Précis

## What is a rhetorical précis?

A *rhetorical précis* is a highly specialized, specific type of summary. It differs from the more general summary in that emphasis is placed upon providing the *rhetorical* aspects of the work under consideration. Like the summary, the goal is to provide in clear, precise language, the main points of a piece. Essential information within the rhetorical précis include the writer's name, the genre and name of the piece, the way in which this information is delivered, the main point, how the point is developed, the purpose of the piece, and the relationship between the writer and audience. This information is presented in only four very specific sentences as outlined below.

## Outline of rhetorical précis

1. Sentence one provides the name of the author; the genre (essay, article, novel, speech, literary criticism...etc.) and title of the work with the date (in parentheses); a concise appropriate action verb, such as "claims, posits, argues, or asserts"; followed by a comma; after which the thesis of the work is stated (either paraphrased, directly quoted, or summed up in one sentence).
  - *Paraphrasing* a passage, means putting that passage into your own words (use your own language).
  - When directly "quoting" a passage, you must write the text using the exact words of the original author, and you must encase the select passage in quotation marks.

Please remember that whenever you paraphrase, directly quote, or even sum up a passage you must follow that passage with a parenthetical citation, meaning that within parentheses, you must insert the page number from which you gathered the passage. If your source does not have a page number then post the paragraph number i.e. **(18)** or **(par. 20)**.

### Example Sentence 1:

In her essay "Cyberspace and Identity" (1999), Sherry Turkle argues that, "today's life on the screen dramatizes and concretizes a range of cultural trends that encourage us to think of identity in terms of multiplicity and flexibility" (272).

2. Sentence two provides an explanation of how the author goes about supporting his/her thesis. Remember that brevity is important—you will not restate the details from the work, but include the *plan of development* (refer to The Essay Components document for assistance with plan of development) of the body of work along with the *rhetorical method* used by the writer to develop these supports.

*Rhetorical methods* are patterns of organization in writing aimed at achieving a particular effect in the reader.

- **Narration** and **Description** are modes with the primary purpose of stirring the reader's emotions.
- **Process, Cause/Effect, Compare/Contrast, Illustration, Definition, and Classification/Division** methods aim at helping readers understand a subject, exploring its functions, causes, consequences, relationships to other subjects, meaning, or nature.
- **Argumentative** and **Persuasive** methods seek to change readers' attitudes or actions with regard to specific subjects.

Each kind of method/mode has its own unique qualities as well as characteristics that are common to a variety of modes.

**Example Sentence 2:**

Turkle supports her assertion by *comparing* theories of cyberspace and identity formation with older understandings of identity found in psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

3. Sentence three states the purpose of the piece, which may reflect the thesis, but should also include the writer's motive—why is he/she writing this piece? This is accomplished with an “in order to” phrase. It should be written as: His/her purpose is X in order to Y. See example below.

**Example Sentence 3:**

Her purpose is to show readers that theories on cyberspace and identity, which claim that identity is multiple and cyclical, do not overturn, but rather add to one's understanding of identity *in order to* encourage her audience “to rethink [its] relationship to the computer culture and psychoanalytic culture as proudly held joint citizenship” (278).

4. Sentence four explains the author's tone and intended audience. One may even include how the author positions him/herself with that audience, possibly through his/her tone.

**Example Sentence 4:**

Turkle's tone assumes a highly educated audience who is familiar with theories not only of cyberspace and identity, but sociology and psychology as well.

## **Sample Four-Sentence Rhetorical Précis**

In her essay "Cyberspace and Identity" (1999), Sherry Turkle argues that, "today's life on the screen dramatizes and concretizes a range of cultural trends that encourage us to think of identity in terms of multiplicity and flexibility" (272). Turkle supports her assertion by comparing theories of cyberspace and identity formation with older understandings of identity found in psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Her purpose is to show readers that theories on cyberspace and identity, which claim that identity is multiple and cyclical, do not overturn, but rather add to our understandings of identity in order to encourage her audience "to rethink [its] relationship to the computer culture and psychoanalytic culture as proudly held joint citizenship" (278). Turkle's tone assumes a highly educated audience who is familiar with theories not only of cyberspace and identity, but sociology and psychology as well.