

Writing a research précis and memo

précis

The **Rhetorical Précis** is a formula designed to help you move beyond simple summary to a more analytical synopsis of a work. As such, the précis, in a compact form, forces you to think about both the content and method of a piece of scholarship. This is very useful in developing an historiographical understanding of the work you are reading, of the connections between works.

The formula for the précis is based on four simple sentences:

1. Sentence on gives the following information:
 - name of the author, title of the work, date in parenthesis;
 - an intentionally chosen active verb (argues, asserts, claims, denies, refutes, proves, disproves, explains, etc.);
 - a *that* clause containing the major claim (thesis) of the work.
2. Sentence that gives an explanation of how the author develops and supports the major claim of the work identified in the first sentence.
3. Sentence that states the author's apparent purpose, followed by an "in order to" phrase.
4. Sentence that identifies the historians, historiographies, or other audience the author is writing for.

Ex:

Charles S. Peirce's article, "The Fixation of Belief (1877)", asserts that humans have psychological and social mechanisms designed to protect and cement (or "fix") our beliefs. Peirce backs this claim up with descriptions of four methods of fixing belief, pointing out the effectiveness and potential weaknesses of each method. Peirce's purpose is to point out the ways that people commonly establish their belief systems in order to jolt the awareness of the reader into considering how their own belief system may be the product of such methods and to consider what Peirce calls "the method of science" as a progressive alternative to the other three. Given the technical language used in the article, Peirce is writing to an well-educated audience with some knowledge of philosophy and history and a willingness to other ways of thinking.¹

¹Source for this example– http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/rhetorical-precis/sample/peirce_sample_precis_click.html

memorandum

A research memorandum extends the précis by including both your summarization of the text, and synthesizing on how you see it fitting in with other scholarship you've read. On the latter, you want to be as specific as possible. Frequently secondary and primary sources are mutual irreconcilable. When that is the case, don't try to make them fit together. Recognize their specific points of disagreement, and be comfortable with them.

A memo can include quotes as part of the summary, but should not just be a series of quotes. The act of summarizing is not the same as the act of taking notes or transcribing.