

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 a few 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.

Example:

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.¹

memorandum

The full memorandum extends and extrapolates on the précis by summarizing the remaining information in the mnemonic tool **THOMAS**.²

T – what is the **topic**? (This should be covered by the précis.)

H – what **historiography** debates is the book or article engaging?

¹Source for this example– http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/rhetoricalprecis/sample/peirce_sample_precis_click.

²Thanks to Danna Agmon for sharing the THOMAS approach here

O – how is the work **organized**? Is it thematic, chronological, etc? What do the table of contents or section divides reveal about the work?

M – What **methods** does the author use? Which archives?

A – what is the central **argument** of the text? This is an extrapolation of point 3 in the précis.

S – So what? Why does the book or matter?

All told, the full memorandum should be one to two pages, single spaced. We're not looking for lots of writing, as much as concise understanding.