

PRECIS-WRITING

A precis* is a summary, and precis-writing means summarising. Precis-writing is an exercise in compression. A precis is the gist or main theme of a passage expressed in as few words as possible. It should be lucid, succinct, and full (*i.e.* including all essential points), so that anyone on reading it may be able to grasp the main points and general effect of the passage summarised.

Precis-writing must not be confused with paraphrasing. A paraphrase should reproduce not only the substance of a passage, but also all its details. It will therefore be at least as long as, and probably longer than, the original. But a precis must always be much shorter than the original ; for it is meant to express only the main theme, shorn of all unimportant details, and that as tersely as possible. As the styles of writers differ, some being concise and some diffuse, no rigid rule can be laid down for the length of a precis ; but so much may be said, that a precis should not contain more than a third of the number of words in the original passage.

I. USES OF PRECIS-WRITING

1. Precis-writing is a very fine exercise in *reading*. Most people read carelessly, and retain only a vague idea of what they have read. You can easily test the value of your reading. Read in your usual way a chapter, or even a page, of a book ; and then, having closed the book try to put down briefly the substance of what you have just read. You will probably find that your memory of it is hazy and muddled. Is this because your memory is weak ? No; it is

* A French word (pronounced *pressee*) connected with the French word *precise*.

because your attention was not fully centred on the passage while you were reading it. The memory cannot retain what was never given it to hold ; you did not remember the passage properly because you did not properly grasp it as you read it. Now precis-writing forces you to pay attention to what you read ; for no one can write a summary of any passage unless he has clearly grasped its meaning. So summarizing is an excellent training in concentration of attention. It teaches one to read with the mind, as well as with the eye, on the page.

2. Precis-writing is also a very good exercise in *writing* a composition. It teaches one how to express one's thoughts clearly, concisely and effectively. It is a splendid corrective of the common tendency to vague and disorderly thinking and loose and diffuse writing. Have you noticed how an uneducated person tells a story ? He repeats himself, brings in a lot of irrelevant matter, omits from its proper place what is essential and drags it in later as an after-thought, and takes twenty minutes to say what a trained thinker would express in five. The whole effect is muddled and tedious. In a precis you have to work within strict limits. You must express a certain meaning in a fixed number of words. So you learn to choose your words carefully, to construct your sentences with an eye to fullness combined with brevity, and to put your matter in a strictly logical order.

3. So practice in precis-writing is of great value for *practical life*. In any position of life the ability to grasp quickly and accurately what is read, or heard, and to reproduce it clearly and concisely, is of the utmost value. For lawyers, businessmen, and government officials it is essential.

II. METHOD OF PROCEDURE

You must make up your mind from the beginning that precis-writing means intensive brain-work. There is no easy short cut to summarising a passage. To tear the heart out of a passage means concentrated thought, and you must be prepared for close attention and hard thinking.

1. **Reading.** (a) First read the passage through carefully, but not too slowly, to get a general idea of its meaning. If one reading is not sufficient to give you this clearly, read it over again, and yet again. The more you read it, the more familiar will it become to you, and the clearer will be (i) its subject, and (ii) what is said about that subject. Ask yourself, "What is it I am reading ? What does the author mean ? What is his subject ? What is he saying about it ? Can I put in a few words the pith of what he says ?"

(b) Usually you are required to supply a *title* for your precis. This is a good stage at which to do this. Think of some word, phrase or short sentence that will sum up briefly the main subject of the passage. Sometimes this is supplied by what we may call a *key-sentence*. This key-sentence may be found at the beginning or at the end of the passage. For example, look at Exercise 148, No. 20, in which the first sentence gives the subject, all the rest of the passage being an expansion and illustration of it : "Hospitality is a virtue for which the natives of the East in general are highly and deservedly admired". This at once suggests the short title of "Eastern Hospitality". But you will not always find such convenient key-sentences in the passage you have to summarise. In their absence, you must get a clear idea of the subject from the passage as a whole, and then sum it up in a suitable heading.

The effort to find a suitable title at this stage will help you to define in your mind what exactly the subject, or main theme, of the passage is.

(c) Further reading is now necessary to ensure that you understand the *details* of

3. Supply a short title which will express the subject.

the passage as well as its main purport. Take it now sentence by sentence, and word by word. If the meanings of any words are not clear, look them up in a dictionary. Detailed study of this kind is necessary, because a phrase, a sentence, or even a single word, may be of prime importance, and the misunderstanding of it may cause you to miss the whole point of the passage.

(d) You should now be in a position to decide what parts of the passage are essential and what parts are comparatively unimportant and so can be omitted without any loss. This process of *selection* is not so easy as some people think. Beginners select ; but they often select in a haphazard or mechanical way. It requires some practice to be able to say, "This is essential to the meaning of the passage, and that is only incidental and unimportant." The best guide, of course, is the subject or main theme of the passage. If you have a clear and correct idea of that you will soon see what is important and what is unimportant.

At this stage it is useful to jot down your conclusions in brief notes—writing down the subject, the title, and the details which you consider essential or important. (This is a better plan than underlining sentences and phrases in the original.)

2. Writing. (a) Rough Drafts—You should now be ready to attempt the writing of the precis ; but be sure of the limits within which it must be compressed. If the number of words is given you, this is easy; but if you are told to reduce the passage to say, a third of its length, count the number of words in the passage and divide by three. You may use fewer words than the number prescribed, but in no case may you exceed the limit.

It is not likely that your first attempt will be a complete success. The draft will probably be too long. In fact you may have to write out several drafts before you find how to express the gist of the passage fully within the limits set. A good deal of patience and revision will be required before you get it right. It is a good plan to write the first draft without having the actual words of the original passages before one's eyes.

(b) Important Points—The following points must be kept in mind:

(i) The precis should be *all in your own words*. It must not be a patchwork made up of phrases and sentences quoted from the original.

(ii) The precis must be *a connected whole*. It may be divided into sections or paragraphs, according to changes in the subject-matter, but these must not appear as separate notes, but must be joined together in such a way as to read continuously.

(iii) The precis must be *complete* and *self-contained* ; that is, it must convey its message fully and clearly without requiring any reference to the original to complete its meaning.

(iv) It is only the gist, main purport, or general meaning of the passage which you have to express. There is no room in a precis for colloquial expressions, circumlocutions, periphrasis or rhetorical flourishes. All redundancies of expression must be rigorously pruned. If faithful reproduction of the main theme is the first essential of a summary, *conciseness* is the second.

(v) The precis must be in simple, direct grammatical and idiomatic English.

(c) The Art of Compression—You are not bound to follow the original order of thought to the passage to be summarised, if you can express its meaning more clearly and concisely by transposing any of its parts.

In *condensing*, aim rather at remodelling, than at mere omission. We may omit mere repetitions, illustrations and examples ; but we change figures of speech into literal expressions, compress wordy sentences, and alter phrases to words.

Take a few examples :—

"His courage in battle might without exaggeration be called lion-like". He was very brave in battle.

"The account the witness gave of the incident moved everyone that heard it to laughter."

The witness's story was absurd.

"There came to his recollection."

He remembered.

"The clerk who is now in his employ."

His present clerk.

"They acted in a manner that rendered them liable to prosecution."

They acted illegally.

"He got up and made a speech on the spur of the moment."

He spoke off-hand.

"John fell into the river and, before help could reach him, he sank."

John was drowned in the river.

"He was hard up for money and was being pressed by his creditor."

He was in financial difficulties.

"The England of our own days is so strong and the Spain of our own days is so feeble, that it is not possible, without some reflection and care, to comprehend the full extent of the peril which England had from the power and ambition of Spain in the 16th century." (51 words.)

We cannot nowadays fully realise what a menace Spain was to England in the 16th century.

(16 words.)



(d) Indirect Speech—As a rule, a precis should be written in indirect speech, after a "verb of saying" in the past tense. For example:—

"Whether we look at the intrinsic value of our literature, or at the particular situation of this country, we shall see the strongest reason to think that of all foreign tongues the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects."

—Macaulay

Condensed in indirect speech :—

Lord Macaulay said that England's noble literature and the universality of her language made English the foreign language most useful for India.

The change from direct to indirect speech calls for attention to the following points :—

(i) Correct sequence of tenses after the "verb of saying" in the past tense.

(ii) Clear differentiation of the various persons mentioned in the passage. Care must be taken with pronouns *he*, *she* and *they*. To avoid confusion proper names should be used occasionally.

(iii) Correct use of adverbs and other words indicating time.

(iv) Proper choice of "verbs of saying", to indicate questions, commands, warnings, threats or exhortations.

Great care must be taken to avoid lapsing into direct speech—a very common fault.

Some passages, however, are best summarised in direct speech.

3. Revision—When you have made your final draft, carefully *revise* it before you write out the fair copy. Be sure that its length is within the limits prescribed. Compare it with the original to see that you have not omitted any important point. See whether it reads well as a connected whole, and correct any mistakes in spelling and punctuation, grammar and idiom.

Then write out the fair copy neatly, prefixing the title you have chosen.

III. TO SUM UP

1. First carefully read the passage, if necessary, several times, apprehend clearly its main theme or general meaning.

2. Examine the passage in detail, to make sure of the meaning of each sentence, phrase and word.

3. Supply a short title which will express the subject.

4. Select and note down the important points essential to the expression of the main theme.
5. Note the length of number of words prescribed for the precis, and write out a first draft.
6. In doing this remember that you are to express the gist of the passage in your own words, and not in quotations from the passage ; that you should condense by remodelling than by mere omission ; and that your precis must be self-contained and a connected whole. Add nothing ; make no comment ; correct no facts.
7. Revise your draft. Compare it carefully with the original to see that you have included all the important points. If it is too long, still further compress it by omitting unnecessary words and phrases or by remodelling sentences. Correct all mistakes in spelling, grammar and idiom, and see that it is properly punctuated. Let the language be simple and direct.
8. Write out neatly the fair copy under the heading you have selected.



SPECIMEN — 1

One great defect of our civilization is that it does not know what to do with its knowledge. Science, as we have seen, has given us powers fit for the gods, yet we use them like small children.

For example, we do not know how to manage our machines. Machines were made to be man's servants; yet he has grown so dependent on them that they are in a fair way to become his masters. Already most men spend most of their lives looking after and waiting upon machines. And the machines are very stern masters. They must be fed with coal, and given petrol to drink, and oil to wash with, and must be kept at the right temperature. And if they do not get their meals when they expect them, they grow sulky and refuse to work, or burst with rage, and blow up, and spread ruin and destruction all round them. So we have to wait upon them very attentively and do all that we can to keep them in a good temper. Already we find it difficult either to work or play without the machines, and a time may come when they will rule us altogether, just as we rule the animals.

(C.E.M. Joad)

Introduction

Questions about the "main idea" of a passage are popular on reading comprehension tests, but sometimes, those questions are difficult to answer, especially for students who are not completely sure they understand what the main idea really *is*. Finding the main idea of a paragraph or longer passage of text is one of the most important reading skills to master, along with concepts like making an **inference**, finding the **author's purpose**, or **understanding vocabulary words** in context.

Here are a few techniques to help understand what, exactly, is a "main idea" and how to identify it accurately in a passage.

The main idea of a paragraph is the primary point or concept that the author wants to communicate to the readers about the topic. Hence, in a paragraph, when the main idea is stated directly, it is expressed in what is called the *topic sentence*. It gives the overarching idea of what the paragraph is about and is supported by the details in subsequent sentences in the paragraph. In a multi-paragraph article, the main idea is expressed in the *thesis statement*, which is then supported by individual smaller points.

Think of the main idea as a brief but all-encompassing summary. It covers everything the paragraph talks about in a general way, but does not include the specifics. Those details will come in later sentences or paragraphs and add nuance and context; the main idea will need those details to support its argument.

For example, imagine a paper discussing the causes of World War I. One paragraph might be dedicated to the role that imperialism played in the conflict. The main idea of this paragraph might be something like: "Constant competition for massive empires led to increasing tensions in Europe that eventually erupted into World War I." The rest of the paragraph might explore what those specific tensions were, who was involved, and why the countries were seeking empires, but the main idea just introduces the overarching argument of the section.

When an author does not state the main idea directly, it should still be implied, and is called an *implied main idea*. This requires that the reader look closely at the content - at specific words, sentences, images that are used and repeated - to deduce what the author is communicating.

Finding the main idea is critical to understanding what you are reading. It helps the details make sense and have relevance, and provides a framework for remembering the content. Try these specific tips to pinpoint the main idea of a passage. ✓

Read the passage through completely, and then try to identify the topic. Who or what is the paragraph about. This part is just figuring out a topic like "cause of World War I" or "new hearing devices;" don't worry yet about deciding what argument the passage is making about this topic.

After reading the passage through thoroughly, summarize it in your own words in **one sentence**. Pretend you have just ten to twelve words to tell someone what the passage is about-what would you say?

Authors often put the main idea in or near either the first or the last sentence of the paragraph or article, so isolate those sentences to see if they make sense as the overarching theme of the passage. Be careful: sometimes the author will use words like *but in contrast*, *nevertheless*, etc. that indicate that the second sentence is actually the main idea. If you see, one of these words that Negate or qualify the first sentence that is a clue that the second sentence is the main idea.

If you read through a paragraph and you have no idea how to summarize it because there is so much information, start looking for repeated words, phrases, or related ideas. Read this example paragraph:

A new hearing device uses a magnet to hold the detachable sound-processing portion in place. Like other aids, it converts sound into vibrations, but it is unique in that it can transmit the vibrations directly to the magnet and then to the inner ear. This produces a clearer sound. The new device will not help all hearing-impaired people - only those with a hearing loss caused by infection or some other problem in the middle ear. It will probably help no more than 20 percent of all people with hearing problems. Those people who have persistent ear infections, however, should find relief and restored hearing with the new device.

What does this paragraph consistently talk about? A new hearing device. What is it trying to convey? A new hearing device is now available for some, but not all, hearing-impaired people. That is the main idea!

Choosing a main idea from a set of answer choices is different than composing a main idea on your own. Writers of multiple-choice tests are often tricky and will give you distractor questions that sound much like the real answer. By reading the passage through thoroughly, using your skills, and identifying the main idea on your own, though, you can avoid making these 3 common mistakes - 1) selecting an answer that is too narrow in scope; 2) selecting an answer that is too broad; 3) or selecting an answer that is complex but contrary to the main idea.

SUMMARY

The main idea is the central, or most important, idea in a paragraph or passage. It states the purpose and sets the direction of the paragraph or passage.

The main idea may be stated or it may be implied.

When the main idea of a paragraph is stated, it is most often found in the first sentence of the paragraph. However, the main idea may be found in any sentence of the paragraph.

The main idea may be stated in the first sentence of a paragraph and then be repeated or restated at the end of the paragraph.

The main idea may be split. The first sentence of a paragraph may present a point of view, while the last sentence presents a contrasting or opposite view.

To find the main idea of any paragraph or passage, ask these questions:

Who or what is the paragraph about?

What aspect or idea about the 'who' or 'what' is the author concerned with?

Finding the main idea can be challenging, but if you use the tools above and practice, you will be well on your way to the score you want on the verbal or reading sections of standardized tests.

Once you can find the topic, you are ready to find the main idea. The main idea is the point of the paragraph. It is the most important thought about the topic.

To figure out the main idea, ask yourself this question: What is being said about the person, thing, or idea (the topic)?

The author can locate the main idea in different places within a paragraph. The main idea is usually a sentence, and it is usually the first sentence. The writer then uses the rest of the paragraph to support the main idea.

Let us use the paragraph below as an example. First, find the topic, and then look for the main idea.

Summer is a wonderful time to spend at West Beach. It is a beach with light-colored, soft sand. The coastline goes on for a long way and many people enjoy walking along it. Children like to play in the surf and walk along the rocks that are visible at low tide. This is a fun beach for people of all ages.

In this paragraph:

- the topic is *West Beach*
- the main idea (what the writer is saying about the topic) is that summer is a wonderful time at West Beach

Here is another example:

*The movie *Apollo 13* was a blockbuster for the summer of 1995. It is an exciting story about space exploration. In the movie, the astronauts get in trouble while they are trying to return to Earth. People in the audience are on the edge of their seats waiting to see what happens. What makes it even more exciting is that it is a true story.*

In this paragraph:

- the topic is the movie *Apollo 13*
- the main idea is in the first sentence: *Apollo 13 was a blockbuster for the summer of 1995*

SUMMARY

A fact is a statement that can be proven true or false. An opinion is an expression of a person's feelings that cannot be proven. Opinions can be based on facts or emotions and sometimes they are meant to deliberately mislead others. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the author's purpose and choice of language. Sometimes, the author lets the

Facts speak for themselves.

The following is an example of a fact:

With fewer cars on the road, there would be less air pollution and traffic noise; therefore, the use of mass transportation should be encouraged.

Sometimes the author may use descriptive language to appeal to your emotions and sway your thinking. The following is an example of an opinion:

Do you like looking at a smoggy view from a congested highway? How do you feel about fighting road hugs and bumper-to-bumper traffic every day? Mass

Transportation is the solution to all these problems.

Emotional language is neither right nor wrong, but the way in which it is used can be positive or negative; it is up to you to make reasonable judgment about the material you are reading and to draw your own conclusion.

Therefore, when you read, it is important to judge facts and opinions carefully in order to come to the right conclusion. Ask yourself, "are the facts reliable?" or "are the opinions based on the facts?" Once you answer these questions, you may be on the right track for finding and sticking to the facts; you are the judge.

SOLVED PRACTICE EXERCISES

Fact or Opinion Quiz

Level A

- War is always wrong.**
(a) Fact (b) Opinion
- Many innocent people are killed in war.**
(a) Fact (b) Opinion
- There is too much unemployment in Britain.**
(a) Fact (b) Opinion
- Wild animals should not be kept in zoos.**
(a) Fact (b) Opinion
- Teachers should be allowed to smack children if they misbehave.**
(a) Fact (b) Opinion
- Royal weddings always attract a lot of interest.**
(a) Fact (b) Opinion
- Cigarettes cause lung cancer.**
(a) Fact (b) Opinion
- England is a nation of pet-lovers.**
(a) Fact (b) Opinion