

Rhetorical Précis Writing

A rhetorical précis analyzes both the content (the WHAT) and the delivery (the HOW) of a unit of spoken or written discourse. It is a highly structured four-sentence paragraph blending summary and analysis. Each of the four sentences requires highly specific information; with practice, students are eventually expected to use brief quotations (to convey a sense of the author's style and tone) and to include a terminal bibliographic reference. Practicing this sort of writing fosters precision in both reading and writing, forcing a writer to employ a variety of sentence structures and to develop a discerning eye for connotative shades of meaning.

Take a look at the overall format...

1. Name of the author, [optional: a phrase describing the author], genre, title of the work, date in parentheses (additional publishing information in parentheses or note); a **rhetorically accurate verb** (such as "assert," "argue," "suggest," "imply," "claim," etc.); and a **that** clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) of the work.
2. An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis, usually in chronological order.
3. A statement of the author's apparent purpose followed by an "**in order to**" clause.
4. A description of the intended **audience** (and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience) and a description of his or her **tone**.

Now take a closer look...

1. **THE FIRST SENTENCE identifies** the essay's *author, title, and genre*, **provides** the article's date in parenthesis, **uses** some form of the verb *says* (*claims, asserts, suggests, argues*, a.k.a. "a rhetorically accurate verb") followed by **that**, and the essay's thesis (paraphrased or quoted).

BASIC EX: In Dave Barry's essay "The Ugly Truth about Beauty" (1998), he satirizes the ways **that** women unnecessarily obsess about their physical appearances.

ADVANCED EX: In the essay "The Ugly Truth about Beauty" (1998), Dave Barry, nationally known humorist, argues **that** "women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do" (4) and in the process become unnecessarily and unrealistically concerned with their appearances.

(Note the slight variations in the order of the title and author information, the optional author description, and the use of cited text in explaining the thesis.)

2. **THE SECOND SENTENCE conveys** the author's support for the thesis with some version of the phrase ***the author develops his or her ideas by***; the trick is to convey a good sense of the breadth of the author's support and examples, usually in chronological order.

BASIC EX: Barry **develops his ideas by** juxtaposing men's perceptions of their looks with women's, contrasting male and female role models, and comparing men's interests with women's.

ADVANCED EX: Barry **illuminates the discrepancy by** juxtaposing men's perceptions of their looks ("average looking") with women's ("not good enough"), by contrasting male role models (He-Man, Buzz-Off) with female role models (Barbie, Cindy Crawford), and by comparing men's interests (the Super Bowl, lawn care) with women's (manicures).

(Note the variation of the "develops his ideas" phrasing, the more sophisticated vocabulary, and the use of both direct and indirect citations of text in support of ideas.)

3. **THE THIRD SENTENCE analyzes** the author's purpose using an ***in order to*** clause:

BASIC EX: Using examples from popular culture, he exaggerates and stereotypes these differences **in order to** poke fun at a social norm and encourage women to rethink their acceptance of these social expectations.

ADVANCED EX: Using examples from popular culture (the Oprah show, Brad Pitt), he exaggerates and stereotypes these differences **in order to** prevent women from so eagerly accepting society's expectations of them; in fact, Barry claims that men who want women to "look like Cindy Crawford" are "idiots" (10).

(Note the fuller analysis of the author's purpose, direct citation of text, and compound-complex sentence structure.)

4. **THE FOURTH SENTENCE describes** the essays' target **audience** and characterizes the author's relationship with that audience—and addresses the essay's **tone**:

BASIC EX: Barry opens and closes the essay by directly addressing men ("If you're a man") and offering to give them advice, but his actual **audience** is both men and women, whom he addresses with a warm but mocking **tone**.

ADVANCED EX: Barry's ostensible **audience** is men because he opens and closes the essay by directly addressing men ("If you're a man") and offering to give them "advice" in a mockingly conspiratorial **tone**; however, by using humor to poke fun at both men and women's perceptions of themselves, Barry makes his essay palatable to both genders and hopes to convince women to stop obsessively "thinking they need to look like Barbie" (8).

Put it all together...

BASIC EXAMPLE

In Dave Barry's essay "The Ugly Truth about Beauty" (1998), he satirizes the ways **that** women unnecessarily obsess about their physical appearances. Barry **develops his ideas by** juxtaposing men's perceptions of their looks with women's, contrasting male and female role models, and comparing men's interests with women's. Using examples from popular culture, he exaggerates and stereotypes these differences **in order to** poke fun at a social norm and encourage women to rethink their acceptance of these social expectations. Barry opens and closes the essay by directly addressing men ("If you're a man") and offering to give them advice, but his actual **audience** is both men and women, whom he addresses with a warm but mocking **tone**.

Word count: 116

ADVANCED EXAMPLE

In the essay "The Ugly Truth about Beauty" (1998), Dave Barry, nationally known humorist, argues **that** "women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do" (4) and in the process become unnecessarily and unrealistically concerned with their appearances. Barry **illuminates the discrepancy by** juxtaposing men's perceptions of their looks ("average looking") with women's ("not good enough), by contrasting male role models (He-Man, Buzz-Off) with female role models (Barbie, Cindy Crawford), and by comparing men's interests (the Super Bowl, lawn care) with women's (manicures). Using examples from popular culture (the Oprah show, Brad Pitt), he exaggerates and stereotypes these differences **in order to** prevent women from so eagerly accepting society's expectations of them; in fact, Barry claims that men who want women to "look like Cindy Crawford" are "idiots" (10). Barry's ostensible **audience** is men because he opens and closes the essay by directly addressing men ("If you're a man") and offering to give them "advice" in a mockingly conspiratorial **tone**; however, by using humor to poke fun at both men and women's perceptions of themselves, Barry makes his essay palatable to both genders and hopes to convince women to stop obsessively "thinking they need to look like Barbie" (8).

Word count: 205

Barry, Dave. "The Ugly Truth about Beauty." *Mirror on America: Short Essays and Images from Popular Culture*. 2nd ed. Eds. Joan T. Mims and Elizabeth M. Nollen. NY; Bedford, 2003. 109-12.

Verb Bank

Here is a list of verbs you might find helpful. It is by no means an exhaustive list. Always strive to employ the most connotatively precise words you can.

Adjures advances advises asks asserts begs beseeches cajoles cheers chimes
commands complains confides conveys counsels crows declares decrees decries
demands describes dictates directs discloses divulges elucidates employs
encourages entreats espouses exclaims exhorts explains gripes groans grouses
grumbles hails hints illustrates implies implores inquires insinuates instructs
intimates invokes justifies laments mandates mocks muses orders pleads ponders
pontificates proclaims pronounces proposes queries rationalizes recommends
recounts relates reports requests reveals sighs sings snarls sneers states submits
suggests summons wails whimpers whines wields wonders