

Format for Precis (weekly assignments)

There is a difference between a text's facts and the strategy used to present those facts. A "precis" (*pray-see*) reflects this difference. It is designed to reflect the structure of a text's argument, not just a set of notes on the text's contents. A precis is one typed page long.

No matter what type, a precis has three sections:

1) A statement about the text's **FOCUS**. This is the main issue that the text addresses.

****You write** a concise statement (1-2 sentences) of that focus.

Likely alternatives:

- issues or problems
- representative concerns of a group, or its interlocked set of beliefs
- institutions/systems
- events and their characteristics or repercussions

E.G.: "The structure of the mind and how it relates to behavior in the social world."

What not to do: Do not include journalistic commentary, or examples, or evaluations -- just state what the topic is.

2) A statement of **LOGIC** and **GOAL** (its **Intent**), which will introduce a **CHART WITH HEADINGS** encompassing the text's data in two parallel columns of notes (usually with page references to the reading).

****You write** a sentence describing the logic pattern (E.g., "By examining the sources of _____, the author shows the consequences of _____";

"In order to _____, the text correlates the _____ and _____ of social behaviors.")

Typical verbs indicating such logic: compare, contrast, link causally, cause, follow from . . .

****After that, you write** two column headings creating classes of information which the author systematically correlates with each other. Under these headings, you typically add three or four examples which fit the content of the text into its form.

Typical categories of information:

- characteristics of a model, role, event
- stages in an event or process
- sources, conditions, or restrictions on a contexts
- participants or interest groups
- effects, impact, consequences
- goals, purposes to be realized.

3) A paragraph (ca. 3 sentences) indicating the **IMPLICATIONS** of the information pattern. This is **not** a description of the information pattern or focus, but rather an extension of the covert statement implied by the information and pattern. **That is**, what is this text/precis *good for*, especially as seen from the outside? In setting the argument up this way, what is being hidden, asserted, or brushed aside? What is new or old-fashioned about the correlations made? Who would profit most by this arrangement?

Grading

clear focus = + 1

logic statement clear = + 1

information pattern clear and pertinent = + 1

consistency (does logic match information match focus match implication?) = + 1

implications (are they pertinent, well-expressed, well-thought-out? do they follow from the development of the argument, or come from nowhere? = + 1

TOTALS: + 5 = A; +4 = B; + 3 = C; + 2 = D; + 1 = F. Assignments are **one page long; top grade is 90 (unless extraordinary synthesis happens in the implications).**

Analytic, Synthetic, and Interpretive Precis: Three Rhetorical Genres

While the precis format given on the previous page applies to all types of analysis, it may nonetheless be used for several other purposes, reflecting different purposes for the writer and reader.

An analytic precis aims at recreating the focus, strategy/goal (intent), and information of one particular text. You, as the writer, intrude only at the level of evaluation (in the implications). Your job is to present and assess the claims made by a particular text as text-generated criteria, and then to specify the (outside) contexts in which those claims are valid, dangerous, useful, etc.

A synthetic precis sets up a comparison/contrast between two (or more) texts. Its focus is the/an issue shared by the two texts. However, it is up to you, the writer, to specify (as the strategy/goal statement) on which grounds and to what end the comparison will be carried out. The information pattern will be drawn from the text; the implication is again provided by you, in terms of "why do this comparison."

An interpretive precis uses one text to read another (applies one systematic strategy to a text). That is, you pretend to be the writer of one text, and read another as s/he would; at the conclusion, you step out of the role-play, and evaluate the relation between the two points of view. It places a still higher burden on you as writer: you must specify the focus (the interpretive issue that the precis will address, and the strategy/goal of how you will explicate that issue -- all before you start. The information pattern will often be arranged as an "issue/example" format, with the issues drawn *systematically* (i.e., in recognizable form) from the strategy text and the examples *also systematically* drawn from the text to be interpreted. An interpretation will not be successful if either text is treated willfully (e.g., against the spirit of its internal organization). Your implication is, again, directed at explaining why you bothered to set up this interpretation this way -- what it is good for.

[*A creative precis* exists, as well-- usually as an outline for an original essay. The writer uses it as an organizer for rhetorical strategy and for information generally drawn from many sources, without particular address to the argumentation of those sources.]

How do I turn these into essays, and what kinds of essays are they?

An analytic precis turns into something like a good book review or proposal evaluation -- the introduction introduces the central issue and the rhetorical tactic that the source text (issue, or party) uses, together with the writer's goal of bothering to explain these. The body of the paper fleshes out the execution of the text's logic, and presents interim evaluations that set up the big evaluation that is the conclusion of the piece.

A synthetic precis resolves a conflict in the favor of one party or another, or shows how the two positions are totally compatible (despite their seeming differences in terminology). The introduction for its essay version must state the basis for the comparison, and the strategy through which the comparison is stated. It will end with a hint as to why this comparison is illustrative or important. The body of the paper must contain a balanced presentation of comparable points (each comparison introduced in terms of the more general overview). The conclusion must decide which side wins -- in terms of a stated set of outside needs/problems that the information addresses.

An interpretive precis applies a point of view to a text explicitly. The introduction to the essay version must state which systematic point of view will be applied to what issue (who you are playing, and why), why that point of view was chosen, how the point of view will be applied

(strategy/goal of the evaluation), and hint at what the goal of the particular interpretation will be. The body of the paper must contain a running *dialogue* between the p.o.v. and the textual information -- it must move stepwise through the p.o.v. and re-interpret the text's data through that lens -- no matter your individual preferences as writer. You will therefore have two levels of critique in the paper: first, a decisive critique of one writer from the p.o.v. of the chosen role, and second, your suggestions about what bringing these two other voices together has achieved. You must interject a decisive critique of both p.o.v.'s as part of the work's final implications (only correctives can be hinted at as it goes along, or foreshadowings of a larger objection that will be dealt with in detail after the immediate analysis is concluded -- don't subvert the voice you're playing at being until you're through).

[A creative precis will set up an op/ed piece or any literary essay, like Robert Benchley's -- the writer is only responsible for the fictive universe set up by the precis, even in the implication. And the implications disappear -- there is no outside, except in the mind of the readers.]

****WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS FOR CL 390 are a combination of two precis types:**

- on the first page, do an analytic precis of one of the theory texts written (including an implication about its usefulness, weakness, or distinctive properties)
- on the second page, do an interpretive precis, applying that theory text (or the model drawn from an amalgam of texts in that particular school or critical movement) to James Joyce's *The Dead* (copy attached).

THE GOAL OF THIS ASSIGNMENT IS TWOFOLD:

- to get you used to working with theory texts as models (that is, learning to distill the philosophical premises of each school in a clear fashion); and
- to get you used to using theory as a model for interpretation (that is, learning how to apply a model's premises in the spirit in which they were designed, not in a randomly eclectic manner -- to interpret literature the way a particular school would, not the way you necessarily want to [which you'll get to later in your graduate student career]).