

All-Purpose Précis Template

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Introduction

The purpose of a précis is to provide a substantive, accurate summary of a text, speech, or other artifact of discourse. It is not a forum for analytical work or criticism; it is intended to be prior to such work.

Benefits of Précis

Composing précis has a number of benefits. The process helps readers master and internalize difficult texts. A collection of précis on a body of literature can be immeasurably helpful for assembling (and developing your own) ideas. If a group (e.g., team of researchers) assemble together such a collection, it can serve as an efficient and effective mechanism for knowledge management.

Understanding “Discourse”

The précis is a basic tool in the broader exercise of mastering and analyzing discourse. What is discourse? Here is a handy definition: “What the experts say when they are speaking as experts.” So, when Aristotle argues a philosophical point with a student, it is discourse. When he discusses lunch with a friend, it is not.

Getting the Gist

When summarizing a work of discourse, it is not necessarily best to paraphrase the entire argument in order. Rather, you are trying to provide a quick representation of what the work is and says. That includes summarizing the main claims (or theses) as well as the primary evidence used to substantiate those claims. But it may also include other information as well. For example, research methods may be relevant (at least at a high level). Is the study complete or only at the midpoint? It may also include information external to the discourse: Is this work foundational to a discipline (as Plato is to philosophy), highly controversial, or mostly a synthetic synthesis of previous work?

Disclaimer

As a template, this document can only create an approximate structure of an effective précis. A given work of discourse is unlikely to map isomorphically onto a template. Therefore, take this template as a big picture guideline. If something needs elaborating, elaborate it! If something is not relevant, skip it!