



Paraphrase, Summary, and Precis

Three writing strategies that will help you understand what you are reading are the paraphrase, summary, and precis. All three ask you to put the information that you're reading into your own words.

Paraphrase

When you paraphrase, you are explaining your source's argument, following its line of reasoning and its sequence of ideas, in your own words. The paraphrase should give the reader an accurate understanding of the author's position on the topic. The purpose of a paraphrase is to convey the meaning of the original message and, in doing so, to prove that you understand the passage well enough to restate it. Remember, your job is not to prove yourself correct, but to uncover and explain all the facts and arguments involved in your subject.

To paraphrase, first substitute synonyms for the passage's more important terms. These synonyms should be accurate both in denotative and connotative meaning. It does not matter yet whether you agree or disagree with the passage; it only matters that you comprehend and show that you understand what the passage says.

This restatement preserves both the original meaning of the passage and the author's position on the matter, but it may be difficult to read at some points. Fine tune the sentence construction, possibly even adding a phrase here and there to illustrate a point more clearly or show a connection between two ideas.

The paraphrase alters the wording of the passage without changing its meaning. It retains the basic logic of the argument, its sequence of ideas, and even the examples used in the passage. Most importantly, it accurately conveys the author's meaning and opinion.

Summary

A summary restates only the author's main ideas, omitting all the examples and evidence used in supporting and illustrating those points. The function of a summary is to represent the scope and emphasis of a relatively large amount of material in an efficient and concise form. In your own words, state the thesis, main arguments and conclusion of the original. In both the paraphrase and summary, the author's meaning and opinion have been retained. However, in the case of the summary, examples and illustrative elements of the passage are omitted. Because they can be used to encapsulate everything from a long narrative passage of an essay, to a chapter in a book, to the entire book itself, summaries can be tremendously helpful.

Precis

The precis (pronounced pray-see) is a type of summarizing that insists on an exact reproduction of the logic, organization, and emphasis of the original texts. It is of particular use in situations in which you want to detail the relative order, proportions, and relationships of the original parts of a text. An effective precis retains the logic, development, and argument of the original in much shorter form. Thus, a precis is useful when you are dealing with lengthy passages that demand careful attention to the logic and organization of an argument.

To write an effective precis, read the passage several times for a full understanding. Note key points. It may, in fact, be helpful to underline these words. Restate each paragraph in one or two sentences. In cases where there are very short paragraphs, combine them in your restatement. Make sure that you retain the precise order of the original points, and combine the sentences into one or more smooth paragraphs. Finally, check your precis against the original to be sure that it is exact and retains the order, proportions, and relationships of the original.