

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 specific information; students are 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 author, [optional: a phrase describing author], genre and title of work and 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 purpose followed by an “in order to” phrase.
4. A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

Now take a closer look:

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

EXAMPLE: In “The Ugly Truth about Beauty (1998), Dave Barry argues that “... women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do” (4).

2. **THE SECOND SENTENCE conveys** the *author's support* for the thesis (the way in which the author develops the essay); the trick is to convey a good sense of the breadth of the author's support/examples, usually in chronological order.

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

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

EXAMPLE: 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 who "look like Cindy Crawford" are "idiots" (10), implying that women who adhere to the Crawford standard are fools as well.

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

EXAMPLE: Barry ostensibly addresses men in this essay because he opens and closes the essay directly addressing men (as in "If you're a man ...") and offering to give them advice in a mockingly conspiratorial fashion; 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 and it looks darn smart:

In "The Ugly Truth about Beauty (1998), Dave Barry argues that "... women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do" (4). Barry illuminates this discrepancy by juxtaposing men's perceptions of their looks ("average-looking") with women's ("not good enough"), by contrasting female role models (Barbie, Cindy Crawford) with male role models (He-Man, Buzz-Off), and by comparing men's interests (the Super Bowl, lawn care) with women's (manicures). 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 who "look like Cindy Crawford" are "idiots" (10), implying that women who adhere to the Crawford standard are fools as well. Barry ostensibly addresses men in this essay because he opens and closes the essay directly addressing men (as in "If you're a man ...") and offering to give them advice in a mockingly conspiratorial fashion; 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).

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 a required or exhaustive list. Remember that you must 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*

Adapted with gratitude from Tracy Duckart's Instructional Website at Humboldt State University