

17. Precis Writing**What it is?**

A précis is a summary of a book or article in which the author's story or argument is accurately and fairly reproduced, but in the student's own words. You do not have to argue anything; a précis is not about your opinion. It is a simple description. It must be written in proper English, without slang.

Purpose:

- Test your comprehension a passage of literature.
- Test your ability to synthesize the information.
- Test your communication skills.

How to write it?

1. Read the article once
2. Read the article at least once more (preferably two to three times, depending on length), mapping out the author's argument
3. Take the resulting argument "map" and re-write it in your own words to the required page length

Remember:

- This is not a reflection paper or book report – it's an exact replica of the original, but shorter, and in different words.
- Try not to quote the text, and limit paraphrasing unless absolutely necessary (that is, unless there's no other way to say it).
- Don't add any opinion or new examples.
- Don't use expressions like "This passage says...", or "According to the author...". You don't want to "stand apart" from the document, but to reproduce its intent, tone, style and mood in different words.

Tips for writing a précis of fiction:

- Look especially for plot structure: the exposition, inciting incident, crisis, final resolution, and denouncement will constitute your through line.
- Identify the conflict in the story and only include that which develops or resolves the conflict.

Tips for writing a précis of nonfiction:

- Identify the topic sentences through the document (check the introduction and conclusion to each section). This will likely provide most of your précis skeleton.

Your précis should contain:

Describe the content of the document. You should include the basic facts, the highlights or main points, the author's emphasis, tone and argument. You may quote a phrase of a few words, but otherwise you should limit quotations because the purpose of the exercise is to see if can paraphrase the argument accurately. Many documents have more than one theme; paragraph your précis accordingly. You do not have to describe the ideas of your document in the order in which they appear, but you do have to give a sense of their importance in your document

Example

Today there are 3000 million people in the world. Fifty years ago only about 2000 million people lived in it. If earth's population were evenly distributed over its land surface, there would be about 550 persons to the square mile. But Earth has vast areas of forest, mountains and desert which are almost totally inhabited. On the other hand, it has great cities each with millions of people living in a few square miles.

To feed the fast growing population of our earth, scientists and planners have to discover new ways to produce more. One possible way is to bring more land not under cultivation. This can be done only in places where there is lot of land not used for productive purposes. In many places there is no longer possible all the arable land is already cultivated. A second way is to make use of new types of seeds to produce more. Already a number of new strains of paddy and wheat have been developed in different parts of the world. India is one of the countries where a lot of useful work has been done in the field of agriculture research.

Title: World Population and Food Production

During the last fifty years, the world population has increased from 2000 to 3000 million. It is unevenly distributed with millions of people living in a few big cities. Scientists in India and abroad are, therefore, busy with agriculture research to find out new methods of increased food production to feed them all and they have already developed many new strains of paddy and wheat.

Practice:

Write a precis of the following passages in one third of its length. Give a suitable title.

Example – 01: While it is fascinating to try and understand animals in the wild, interacting with domestic animals, especially pets, can be delightfully enlightening. I will never forget the message conveyed to me by a little wild creature. I had reared a baby squirrel with a mind of her own. Once, intent on studying the construction of her teeth, I cupped her tiny body in the palm of my hand, held her head gently between my fingers, and tried to force open her jaw with my other hand. A polite paw pushed my hand away. I tried again, this time restricting her paw. Her other paw broke free, and she pushed my hand away a second time, this time, more emphatically. Refusing to acknowledge her unwillingness, I moved my hand towards her mouth once more – and this time she freed both her paws and clapped them over her month; a move that made it impossible for me to open her month-and left me stumped, amazed and chuckling with delight at her ingenuity! My baby squirrel had conveyed exactly what she felt; Leave my mouth alone, won't you? Can't you understand when I tell you politely? A little more complicated than the message sent by the thundering elephant – but just as clear!

The complexity of man – animal communication is probably a factor of not just the intelligence of the animal, but also the level of intimacy between the animal and the human. Our five-year-old mastiff understands that when visitors are present, he is not to enter the living room. One night, however, he stood persistently at the door, disregarding my husband's commands to go out, repeatedly trying to attract my attention.

While hosts and guests pretended he didn't exist and we all tried hard to ignore him, the dog drew increasingly uncomfortable, till suddenly, he walked in straight to me, refusing to look at my husband, apology in every step for having dared to disobey him. With all eyes riveted on him, he sat down on his haunches in front of me, eyes imploring. When I still did not understand, he shoved his muzzle into my palm, shaking his head so as to move my hand. And then it clicked – we had forgotten to feed him!

Every single person present in the room understood what he was saying. "I am sorry to disobey you, but I'm terribly hungry and can I have my dinner please?". The interesting

thing is that he was communicating two different messages to two different people at the same time.

Animals of higher intelligence are also capable of understanding messages at a symbolic level-ability often thought to be the preserve of human beings. Consider this story that was narrated to me some years ago; of a mahout in Kerala who, wanting to take a dip in the river, pulled up a long blade of grass, and tied it like a chain round his elephant's leg. The gentle giant understood what was required of him, and obliged the master by allowing himself to be restrained by the symbolic chain.

Animals, in fact, often understood far more than we wish to communicate, since their understanding is based on non-verbal signals which are often very revealing. Like children, animals too pick up negative and positive 'vibes' – of anger, fear, dislike or of affection and kindness. Dogs and horses, specially, also seem to know when their masters are unwell or depressed, and go out of their way to show that they care.

In the wild, however, the scenario is different. While wild animals certainly pick up non-verbal cues from us, in the main, they do not volunteer to communicate with humans except when it is absolutely necessary. This is largely due to two seemingly contradictory reasons. One, man has isolated himself to such an extent that he is no longer an integral part of an interdependent biosphere. Two, he is a predator who preys on both carnivores and herbivores, and is a threat to practically every other species. For these reasons, wild animals avoid us whenever possible, and interaction with human beings threaten them or their young when we are threatened by them or when we observe them for work or for pleasure.

It is a sad commentary on the reputation of Nature's most intelligent animals that as a race, the only message we have effectively communicated to most of the natural world are those of threat, dominance, destruction and death. As creatures of superior intelligence that are now beginning to understand that our survival is dependent on theirs, it is imperative that we change this attitude. The moot point is, even if we succeed, how long will it take to reverse generations of signals sent by the old enemy, Man? Will it be possible, one day, to communicate to animals that we mean no harm and would like to be friends?

Example – 02: An old tailor and his wife lived on the outskirts of a city. They had a daughter whom they both loved very much and as she was about to be married they took great pains to save money. The man toiled for long hours and his wife worked too. With the money they saved they purchased a few ornaments and kept them in a small wooden box for safekeeping. One day their hut caught fire. The man and his wife escaped just in time but the fire spread rapidly and soon engulfed the whole house. The neighbours soon gathered around and would not allow the man to risk his life and enter the house to save the precious ornaments. They drew water from nearby wells to pour onto the fire. A young traveller saw the poor man in tears and said, "Why are you so upset? Your house can soon be rebuilt." "It is not my house that I am shedding tears for", the tailor replied, "But the ornaments that we have bought for our daughter. Now we shall not be able to give her the wedding gift we worked so hard for!" The traveller thought for a while and seeing the plight of the poor man decided to help, but for a price. "I will help you on condition that I will give you only what I like." The poor man was so desperate to salvage a few of the ornaments at least that he agreed.

The young man entered the house carefully and located the box hidden exactly where the old man had said it would be. He came out of the house with the box, opened it, removed the ornaments and returned the box to the tailor. The old man was bewildered. "But the ornaments are mine. Why have you done this?" the tailor asked. "I agreed to give you what I liked and so I have given you the box", the young man retorted cheekily. The neighbours were annoyed with the young man but could think of no solution. The old man had agreed to the condition after all. But his wife intervened, "Let us go to the magistrate. He is a just man. Surely he will find a solution." The young man was not willing to go to the magistrate but the neighbours insisted. When he heard the story the magistrate realized the young man had taken advantage of the poor tailor. "You told the tailor that you would give him what you liked and he agreed, is that correct?" he asked. "Yes. I will give you what I like were my exact words", the young man replied. "Do you like the ornaments?" the magistrate questioned. "Yes of course!" "Well as you like the ornaments you have to give them back to the old man as was agreed between you." The young man realized that he had been outwitted.

Example – 03: Economists have rightly emphasized the risks to globalization from economic and financial instability. But they have ignored environmental destruction, and the resulting global warming which is now the central global concern. Fast-growing middle-

income nations, such as China, Malaysia and India, have a big stake in globalization - and therefore, in confronting this environmental danger. Their rise has been tied to globalization. They have doubled their trade in the past decade, and by liberalizing commercial policies, have also helped others gain. To China, Indonesia as well as India, environmental outcomes have a special significance. They possess 60% of the world's freshwater resources, 60% of the forests, much of the coral reefs, and valuable biodiversity. But they also face massive degradation of air, forest, land, freshwater, and marine resources, with the rise in population, adding up to high cost. The atmosphere concentration of carbon dioxide reached 379 parts per million in 2005 compared to a pre-industrial level of 280 ppm. Scientists concur that to avoid massive climatic instability, the change in global temperature ought not to be more than 2° C above pre-industrial levels. To secure that outcome with some certainty, the concentration of carbon dioxide needs to stay below 400 ppm. Rich countries like the United States, Japan, and the European nations are by far the most responsible for this and other greenhouse gas emissions in per capita terms. So they must propel mitigation measures to improve energy efficiency and protect the environment. But middle-income countries now account for half of all emissions, and they would not want to emulate the poor example set by rich countries.

In Brazil, China and India, air and water pollution is severely impairing people's health and productivity in the workplace with a direct impact on growth prospects. Moreover, globalization has speeded the spillover of these damages. Growth fuelled by energy-intensive industry, urban crowding, and deforestation has added to atmospheric concentrations of carbon, warming land and ocean and bringing extreme weather. In turn, climate change threatens to erode coastlines and provoke droughts and floods, in rich countries and poor. A clear link is emerging between deforestation and soil degradation on the one side, and the fastest rising natural disasters, which are floods and wind storms, on the other. Societal benefits of abating high levels of emissions far outweigh the costs of doing so. Yet economists and policy makers have not drawn the implication of this calculus for the reform agenda, be it in trade, energy or infrastructure. Sadly, the costs of such neglect are large. Also, no country, rich or poor, has enough motivation to confront global problems alone. Because only a part of the benefits of addressing those problems would accrue to countries taking action, while others could have a free ride. The gains are also spread over time, beyond the horizon of politicians' interest. Such situations call for collective action, even if they are not easy when many diverse countries are involved.

The crucial question is how best countries might participate in collective measures to mitigate environmental threats to growth. One opening involves avoiding deforestation. Cutting down forests accounts for a fifth of the emissions, more than those from all transportation. By protecting their forests, countries can reduce carbon emissions in the atmosphere, paving the way for new markets for tradable emission permits that would compensate them for the protection. Whether and how quickly the environment is accorded top priority will determine the future of the world economy.

Example – 04: China's rising power is based on its remarkable economic success. Shanghai's overall economy is currently growing at around 13% per year, thus doubling in size every five or six years. Everywhere there are start-ups, innovations, and young entrepreneurs hungry for profits. In a series of high-level meetings between Chinese and African officials, the advice that the African leaders received from the Chinese was sound, and more practical than they typically get from the World Bank. Chinese officials stress the crucial role of public investments, especially in agriculture and infrastructure, to lay the basis for private sector led growth. In a hungry and poor rural economy, as China was in the 1970's and as most of Africa is today, a key starting point is to raise farm productivity. Farmers need the benefits of fertilizer, irrigation and high-yield seeds, all of which were a core part of China's economical takeoff. Two other equally critical investments are also needed: roads and electricity, without which there cannot be a modern economy. Farmers might be able to increase their output, but it won't be able to reach the cities, and the cities won't be able to provide the countryside with inputs. The government has taken pains to ensure that the electricity grids and transportation networks reach every village in China. China is prepared to help Africa in substantial ways in agriculture, roads, power, health and education. And that is not an empty boast. Chinese leaders are prepared to share new high-yield rice varieties, with their African counterparts and, all over Africa, China is financing and constructing basic infrastructure.

This illustrates what is wrong with the World Bank. The World Bank has often forgotten the most basic lessons of development, preferring to lecture the poor and force them to privatize basic infrastructure, which is untenable, rather than to help the poor to invest in infrastructure and other crucial sectors. The Bank's failure began in the early 1980s when under the ideological sway of then American President and British Prime Minister it tried to get Africa and other poor regions to cut back or close down government investments and services. For 25 years, the bank tried to get governments out of agriculture, leaving

impoverished peasants to fend for themselves. The result has been a disaster in Africa, with farm productivity stagnant for decades. The bank also pushed for privatization of national health systems, water utilities,' and road and power networks, and has grossly underfinanced these critical sectors. This extreme free-market ideology, also called "structural adjustment", went against the practical lessons of development successes in China and the rest of Asia. Practical development strategy recognizes that public investments—in agriculture, health, education, and infrastructure—are necessary complements to private investments. The World Bank has instead wrongly seen such vital public investments as an enemy of private sector development. Whenever the bank's ideology failed, it has blamed the poor for corruption, mismanagement, or lack of initiative. Instead of focusing its attention on helping the poorest countries to improve their infrastructure, there has been a crusade against corruption. The good news is that African governments are getting the message on how to spur economic growth and are getting crucial help from China and other partners that are less wedded to extreme free-market ideology than the World Bank. They have declared their intention to invest in infrastructure, agriculture modernization, public health, and education. It is clear the Bank can regain its relevance only if it becomes practical once again, by returning its focus to financing public investments in priority sectors. If that happens, the Bank can still do justice to the bold vision of a world of shared prosperity that prompted its creation after World War II.