
UNIT 14 PRECIS WRITING

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the meaning of the term 'precis'
- outline the characteristics of a good precis
- identify the problems in writing a precis
- describe the method of writing a precis
- write a precis for a given passage.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 13 you learnt about the preparation of various types of reports. In this unit you will learn about another important secretarial function, precis writing, which involves an exercise in comprehension and condensation of an article, speech or correspondence.

14.2 WHAT IS A PRECIS?

'Precis' is a French word derived from the Latin word 'Praecissus', past participle of 'Praecidere' which means to cut off, to be brief, and is connected with the English word 'Precis'.

A precis is a summary or the gist of the main ideas of written matter. Thus, precis writing means summarising. It is an exercise in concentration, comprehension and condensation. In order to make a summary of an article, a speech or a story, one has to read it carefully and grasp its meaning. Precis-writing forces one to concentrate on the material which is to be summarised.

In summarising a passage, though the length of the summary is not fixed, it is generally expected that the summary would be one third the length of the passage. The summary is known as precis and precis writing means summarising. It involves preparing a statement concisely so as to convey the essential ideas contained in a longer passage or article. In other words, precis is the gist or substance of a lengthy passage. A precis is not a paraphrase. At the same time, the essential points of the main passage must be presented in the precis in such a manner that the reader may easily grasp the main ideas of the passage.

14.3 WHY PRECIS?

The primary object of precis writing is to present facts and information to spend time reading unnecessary details. The necessity of speedily reading documents mainly arises in business firms and government departments besides other fields of activity. Lawyers, journalists, students, and secretaries of business executives need to apply the art of precis writing regularly in their day to day activities. Lawyers have to summarise the main points of their cases, editors and reporters have to summarise news and speeches; students have to make notes from lectures and text-books. The importance of precis writing in business lies in the economical way of recording and presenting lengthy documents in compressed form. Busy executives and managers in large organisations can get in the precis all the essential points and thus can avoid the time-consuming process of going through long correspondence, reports, etc. An important duty of the secretary of every organisation is to prepare the precis of business documents including letters, reports and minutes of meetings.

14.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PRECIS

The characteristics of a good precis may be outlined as follows:

- 1) A good precis is not merely a list of the main ideas of a passage. The ideas are to be organised and expressed in a logical sequence so that the precis reads like an original piece of composition.
- 2) A good precis should contain all the essential ideas in the original passage, omitting non-essential detail, examples, etc. The ideas should be, as far as possible, in the same order as in the original. We should remember that in a precis one should not add anything that the original passage does not contain. There is no need to comment on the original matter either.
- 3) The language of precis should be clear, brief and precis, maintaining at the same time the style and spirit of the original.
- 4) A precis should be written in indirect speech.
- 5) A good precis should, as far as possible, be in the writer's own words.
- 6) It should not exceed or fall short of the length prescribed by too large a margin. Usually, the limit set for a precis is one third in length of the original.

Check Your Progress A

- 1) Define the term 'Precis'

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- 2) Write the importance of writing a precis.

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14.5 METHOD OF WRITING A PRECIS

To write a good precis of a passage one needs to practice a lot. The major steps to be followed while writing a precis are:

- 1) First of all, one should read the passage two or three times carefully to understand clearly its general theme. In short, comprehension of the passage is the first step in precis-writing.
- 2) Secondly, it is necessary to write down the main points of the passage by picking out the essential ideas and leaving out the unimportant details. At this stage, compression or condensation of the passage takes place. Repetitions, illustrations and examples can be eliminated. Sentences and clauses may also be compressed into shorter by using, for instance, a word for a phrase, a phrase for a clause and so on. In compressing a passage, selection, rejection and generalisation are often useful. The words and sentences of the original passage should be avoided to the extent possible. But one has to make sure that the sentences are linked up properly to show the interrelationship of the ideas in the passage. While being a summary of the original, the precis should be a piece of self contained readable and continuous whole.
- 3) Next, write down a preliminary or a rough draft, keeping in mind the length of the precis.
- 4) If it is necessary to provide a title to the summary, a short title may be given which will express the ideas in the passage.
- 5) While making the final draft, one should make sure that all the main points are included in the precis. One should also check whether the precis reads well and is within the length prescribed. Give it a suitable heading.

If one is able to write a good precis, it is an indication of his or her ability to think clearly and to distinguish what is important and what is not.

14.6 PROBLEMS IN WRITING A PRECIS

In writing a precis, one usually faces the following problems.

Accuracy: The first problem in writing a precis is to get the facts straight. One should not make any statement without the support of facts. It is important to go through the precis carefully to make sure that whatever is stated is factually correct.

Using Own Words: The second problem is the difficulty using one's own words in the precis to convey ideas given in the original passage. The best way to overcome the problem is to read the passage carefully at least three to four times, and then writing the precis without looking at the original. In this way, one may be able to use one's own words, without the temptation of borrowing directly from the original. However, if some words and phrases have been used from the original from source, the same may be underlined. At the time of revision, own words may be used in place of the underlined words. If it is impossible to change some words, one may retain them from the passage.

Selecting Details: The third problem is deciding on the details to be included in the precis. One should try to pick out only those details that are important. For example, Two people may go to a restaurant and order many dishes and engage in lengthy conversation. In a precis covering the above sentence, you do not need to mention each item of food and drink. If one of the character gets drunk, however, it may be noted that the observations made by

the person were under the influence of liquor. Similarly, one need not report the entire conversation; only the relevant part and important points need to be recorded. Certain things are more important than others, and one must choose details according to the scale of importance.

Avoiding Conclusions: Since a precis is a factual summary of a passage, one should avoid drawing conclusions based on one's own interpretation of the facts. Personal opinion has no place in a precis, so it is better to stick to details.

Avoiding Short Sentences: Although one may concentrate on essentials in the precis, short and choppy sentences should be avoided. Here is an example:

Mary is beginning to walk to the Church. She is old but cheerful. She walks with a cane. She has walked this way many times.

Here there are four sentences, all very short and beginning with the subject followed immediately by the verb. Sentences like these are jerky in style. A revision of such a passage should reduce the number of sentences but keep the same details as in the following:

Mary begins her familiar walk from her home to the Church. She is an old woman who needs a cane for support, but she is cheerful.

Check Your Progress B

- 1) Write three problems faced in writing a precis?

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- 2) State whether the following statements are True or False.

- i) A precis is an exercise in concentration, comprehension and condensation.
- ii) Comprehension of the passage of the original are to be retained in the precis.
- iii) The words and sentences of the original are to be retained in the precis.
- iv) A precis need not contain all the essential ideas in the original.
- v) A precis should be written in direct speech.
- vi) The title of the precis should be short and express the theme of the subject.
- vii) You cannot write a good precis unless you have carefully studied and understood the material you want to summarise.

14.7 SOME ILLUSTRATIONS

In earlier sections of this unit, you have learnt the meaning of precis its characteristic, the problems involved in writing a precis and the method of writing a precis. Now you are in a position to write a precis of any given passage. Let us do some exercises.

Exercise 1

The passage given below describes the Industrial Revolution of Europe and the improved conditions of the working class. It consists of 292 words. Let us write a precis of about 100 words and suggest a title. First, read the passage carefully.

One of the outstanding features of the century has been the improvement of living conditions of the working man, greater political power, more wealth and leisure, and better facilities for health, security and education.

In early civilisations, most communities were sharply divided into two classes, those who laboured and those who did not. The small number of rulers — kings, priests, military leaders — lived in great comfort, and did very little work. The vast majority of the population enjoyed very few comforts, did lot of work, and had scarcely any political power. In some societies, there was an even more wretched class, the slaves, who had no rights at all.

The Industrial Revolution of Europe led to the production of vast quantities of goods, and workers began to be dissatisfied with their poverty. The factory owners needed skilled workers, and gradually they realised that they must show goodwill to their workforce, in order to stay in business. As in many other reforms, some enlightened slowly spread that workers were entitled to some consideration. Since men were free to work for any master they chose, good master soon had the pick of the workers and old-fashioned employers found themselves with a factory full of lower-grade workforce. Such a situation soon led to an all-round improvement in standards, and good employers tried to raise working conditions still higher. These improvements were speeded up by the increased organisation of workers in Trade Union movements, particularly in low-standard factories, where the owner often had to deal with strike action by dissatisfied workers.

Now that the working classes are getting better and better working conditions, the need to strike has lessened considerably; and employers and workers alike have come to realise that they depend on each other for their livelihood. (292 words)

As discussed earlier, you are now required to read the passage two or three times carefully. After reading the passage, the main points are to be listed. Will you now try to note down the main points of the passage in the space given below?

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We think that the points you develop would be similar to the following points. Compare the points you listed with the points given below.

Main Points

- 1) Working classes enjoy better living conditions in the present century.
- 2) In earlier civilisations there was a big gap between the conditions of kings, etc. and those of the masses.
- 3) The effect of the Industrial Revolution on the lot of the working classes is significant.
- 4) The starting of the Trade Unions.

With the help of the points given below, we can attempt the rough draft of the precis.

First Draft

An important feature of this century is the improvement in the living conditions of the working classes, in the form of more power, wealth, leisure and security. At one time, kings, leaders, priests, etc., lived in comfort doing little or no work while the majority did all the work and enjoyed few comforts and rights. In some countries there were slaves who had no rights at all. During the Industrial Revolution of Europe, production increased and workers started feeling dissatisfied. Employers were induced to improve working conditions so as to improve production. Some even felt workers had a right to better conditions. Clever

employers selected the best workers. This led to competition and improvement of working conditions. Soon Trade Unions were organised to fight for 'rights' of workers or even to start strikes. Now employers and employees have come to realise their mutual dependence and strikes are disappearing. (148 words)

There are 148 words in the passage above. It is necessary for us to reduce the number to about 100 words so that it would be one-third of the original passage. We shall, therefore, reduce the passage further to make it a precis of about 100 words. Read the passage given below and note how we have condensed almost all the sentences to make it a good precis within 100 words.

Final Draft

An important feature of this century is the improvement of the lot of the workers. In earlier civilisations, kings, priests, etc., lived comfortably doing little, while the majority worked hard with few comforts and rights. Some societies had slaves too. During the Industrial Revolution, production increased and workers started feeling dissatisfied. Clever employers attracted the best workers by offering better conditions and thus led to improvement in production. Some employers thought that workers had a right to better conditions. Soon Trade unions were organised to fight for workers rights with strikes, if necessary. Now, there is increasing realisation of the mutual dependence of employers and their workers. (107 words)

The title we may suggest is:

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND THE WORKING CLASS

Exercise 2

Let us take up another passage and attempt writing a precis in about 85 words and also suggest a title. This passage is on advertising. Let us read the passage.

The chief object of the repetitive form of advertisement is to help people to remember the product. The general principle is similar to that followed by Bajaj Automotives Ltd: "You just can't beat a bajaj". The repetition of a phrase, the inclusion of a trade name or a trade mark in every advertisement, is intended to impress upon the mind of the reader/listener that name or phrase or picture. The response sought by the advertiser is achieved when a customer enters a shop for, say, toothpaste. To the shop-keeper's question, "Any particular brand, please?", the customer gives the reply that is in his mind, not necessarily because he has arrived at a decision by any process of reasoning, nor because some strong feeling has been aroused for some particular brand, but simply because he has repeatedly seen the name, and it is associated in his mind with the idea of a good toothpaste. Some trade names become so common that they displace the true name of the commodity itself, such as 'vaseline', the well-known trade name for 'petroleum jelly'. Advertisements which have relied on repetition have, in the past, proved very powerful, but with the increased variety of proprietary articles and products intended for the same purpose, this kind of advertising is losing some of its value because of the confusion of names that arise in a customer's mind when he wishes to buy, say, cigarettes, tobacco, soap, chocolates, tea and other goods which are widely used. (248 words)

Now prepare a brief outline of the main points as we have done in the earlier exercise.

Main Points

- 1) Simplest form of advertising is repetition; it helps people to remember.
- 2) A phrase or trade name or trade mark is used repeatedly to make an impression.
- 3) Customer asks for product, name of which is impressed on her/his mind.
- 4) Repetition advertising is becoming less effective now.

You can now make an attempt to write the final version of the precis and compare the same with the one given below.

Precis Writing

Precis

The use of repetition is the simplest form of advertising. In advertisements, repeated use of a particular phrase or trade-mark aims to make such an impression on the customer that he will tend to buy that product. Indeed, some trade-names, 'vaseline' for example, have become so well known that they are used instead of the real name of the products. Owing to the large number of consumer articles and products now in the market, advertising by repetition is less effective than it was in the past. (87 words)

The title may be suggested as below:

ADVERTISING BY REPETITION

Check Your Progress C

Write a precis of the following passage in not more than 160 words and suggest a title for it. Before writing the final version of the precis, note down the main points of the passage.

In the last half of the nineteenth century 'capital' and 'labour' were enlarging and perfecting their rival organisations on modern lines. Many an old family firm was replaced by a limited liability company with salaried managers. The change met the technological requirements of the new age by engaging a large professional element; and prevented the decline in efficiency that marred the fortunes of family firms in the second and third generation after the energetic founder. It was, moreover, a step away from individual initiative, towards collectivism and municipal and stage-managed business. The railway companies, though still private concerns managed for the benefit of shareholders, were very unlike old family businesses. They existed by reasons of Acts of Parliament, that conferred on them power and privileges in return for state control. At the same time the great municipalities went into business to supply lighting, trams and other services to the ratepayers. The growth of the limited liability company and municipal trading had important consequences. Such large, impersonal manipulation of capital and industry greatly increased the number and importance shareholders as a class, an element in the national life representing irresponsible wealth detached from the land and the duties of the land-owner; and almost equally detached from the responsible management of business. All through the nineteenth century, America, Africa, India, Australia and parts of Europe were thus being developed largely by British capital, and British shareholders were thus being enriched by the world's movement towards industrialisation. Towns like Bournemouth and Eastbourne sprang up to house large 'comfortable' classes who had retired on their incomes, and who had no relation to the rest of the community except that of drawing dividends and occasionally attending a shareholders' meeting to bully the management. On the other hand, "shareholding" meant leisure and freedom which was used by many of the Victorians for the highest purposes of a great civilisation.

The "shareholder" as such had no knowledge of the lives, thoughts or needs of the workmen employed by the company in which he held shares, and his influence on the relations of capital and labour was not good. The paid manager acting for the company was in more direct relation with the men and their demands, but even he had seldom that familiar personal knowledge of the workmen which the employer had often had under the more patriarchal system of the old family business. Indeed the mere size of operations and the numbers of workmen involved rendered such personal relations impossible. Fortunately, however, the increasing power and organisation of the trade unions, at least in all skilled trades, enabled the workmen to meet on more equal terms with the managers of the companies who employed them. The harsh discipline of the strike and lockout taught the two parties to respect each other's strength and understand the value of fair negotiation (478 words).

A precis is a summary of the whole passage. Precis writing is an exercise in concentration, comprehension and condensation. One has to read the passage carefully and grasp its meaning before writing a precis. The art of writing a good precis is very useful to people like lawyers, journalists, students, secretaries and business managers.

A precis should be written in indirect speech. Further one must ensure that each idea follows logically from the one before, so that the precis has a logical flow and cohesion. In addition to unity, one must also ensure that the precis is factually correct and it does not contain ideas or opinions which are not in the original passage. One should not add own ideas or comments or any extra information not contained in the passage.

Cohesion: A piece of text in which idea fit well together to form a unified whole.

Comprehension: An exercise in language teaching to find out how well you understand a piece of spoken and written language.

Condensation: To make something shorter.

Diffuse: A text that is vague and difficult to understand or explain.

Gist: The general meaning or the most important points of a long piece of writing.

Indirect Speech: Where the speakers exact words are not given but the exact meaning of the remark or speech is given in passive voice.

Phrase: A group of words, containing neither subject nor predicate, which functions as a unit within a sentence.

Precis Writing

14.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

B) 2 (i) True (ii) False (iii) False (iv) False (v) False (vi) True (vii) True

C) The main points of the passage are:

- 1) In the second half of the 19th century, industry in Britain was reorganised on a larger and more impersonal basis:
 - family firms became limited liability companies; and
 - municipalities went into business
- 2) The class of shareholders
 - became numerous and more important; and
 - investment without having any responsibility.
- 3) Labour relations declined because of the:
 - the shareholder's irresponsibility;
 - the shareholder's ignorance of the conditions of the working class; and
 - the impersonality of large companies.

The developing status of the trade unions enabled work people to resist management.

The resulting disputes led to mutual respect and a desire for fair negotiation.
- 4) Industrial relations took on a new pattern.

The following is an acceptable version of the precis

Between 1850 and 1900 British industry became organised on a larger scale and so became impersonal. Old family firms gave place to limited liability companies, and municipalities became large-scale employers to provide services for the ratepayers. These developments led to a growth in the number and significance of shareholders, who with little effort, gained great wealth from Britain's world-wide trade and investment and had little or no responsibility for the way that the wealth was gained. The shareholders irresponsibility, their ignorance of how the poor lived, and the size of the companies which inhibited personal relations, led to ill-feeling between capital and labour. However, the growing influence and discipline of the trade unions enabled the work people to resist unfair management. Strikes and lockouts taught the two sides to respect each other and to negotiate on a fair basis. In this way industrial relations moved from the paternalism of the family business to the organisational pattern of today. (155 words)

The title we may suggest is:

NEW PATTERN OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

14.11 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

- 1) State the characteristics of a good precis?
- 2) Discuss the various steps in writing a precis.
- 3) What are the problems you face in writing a precis?
- 4) Write a precis of the following passage in about 115 words. Your version should avoid as far as possible the words and phrases of the original. State the number of words you have used and suggest a title.

If a business activity does not require anything special to be done, it is not entrepreneurship. In fact a person cannot be called an entrepreneur unless he introduces something new, something different, in his venture. This is known as innovation, that is, doing something different from others. The entrepreneurs are constantly on the look out for something unique to fulfil the need or want of people. They may or may not be investors of new products or new methods of production, but they are able to foresee the possibility of making use of the invention for business. Others who come to know about the same invention are not capable of thinking about its practical usefulness in business. Or, they may not have the ambition or self-confidence to take advantage of it.

In a competitive market, an entrepreneur can succeed in his business only through innovation. An innovation need not necessarily be something big or dramatic. A simple adjustment to something old, or giving a service without extra charge or a colourful packaging or selling a product in packets of different weights, and such types of steps may be profitable innovations. Of course, if similar things are done by a number of producers and sellers, and entrepreneur has to think of other types of innovations. No wonder that imagination is something more important than knowledge for innovative thinking. An entrepreneur must have imagination and also the ability to think creatively.

Take the case of fruit juice. Now-a-days fruit juice is sold in small cartoons instead of bottles so that you can carry it and throw away the container after drinking the juice. This is an innovation. Let us take another example. You may have heard of Henry Ford who established the Ford Motor Company in the United States. He did not invent the automobile, but he applied new methods of mass production and turned out passenger cars at low cost so that many people could afford it. (338 words)

Note: These questions will help you to understand the unit better. Try to write answers for them. But do not submit your answer to the university for assessment. These are for your practice only.

SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Ghosh & Ghosh; **Handbook of Secretarial Practice & Office Procedure**; Vidyodaya Library Private Ltd; 72, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Calcutta.

Rajendra Pal and J.S. Korlahalli; **Essentials of Business Communication**, Sultan Chand & Sons; New Delhi.

Y.P. Singh & B. Singh; **Office Management & Secretarial Practice**; Gian Publishing House, Delhi.

L. Gartside; **Modern Business Correspondence**; Pitman Publishing Limited; 128, Long Acre, London.