

A290/A590

Tools for Computing: System Programming with C and Unix.

What is a Précis?

Some of you have asked what I'm looking for when I ask you to include a précis of the various on-line articles you include in your MINI assignments. Here is one attempt to clarify what a précis is and how it is different from your summary.

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. This is why your précis has to be done before you submit your JIT questions. Your task is to try to understand what points the author is making, on your own.

Benefits of Précis

Composing even a brief précis has a number of benefits. The process helps you master and internalize difficult ideas. A collection of précis on a set of related topics can also be immeasurably helpful for future reference. 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. In addition, you now have your own summary of the work in question that you can return to weeks, months, or years from now in order to "refresh" your memory.

Understanding "Discourse"

The précis is a basic tool in the broader exercise of mastering and analyzing all forms of 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. It is often more challenging to identify real discourse in the on-line environment that we all use more and more frequently to access and distribute information.

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 about and what the author is trying to say. That includes summarizing the main claims (or *theses*) as well as any evidence or related concepts used to substantiate those claims. It may also include information external to the discourse: Is this work foundational to a discipline, highly controversial, or something else. If it is on-line, what reasons are stated or implied that the author is an expert?

Précis versus your "Summary"

I ask you to also create a Summary "in your own words" as part of each MINI. This is different from the précis insofar as you are now trying to use your own words to explain or summarize the topic at hand. In the précis, you will usually find yourself using the vocabulary and organization employed by the original author(s) as a guide.