

Writing an Argument Summary: Rhetorical Précis¹

Students must learn how to analyze arguments—whether they are written or spoken—and accurately describe the rhetorical techniques used in the work. One way to prepare students for this type of thinking is to engage them in a reading and writing exercise called a rhetorical précis. There are two purposes for a rhetorical précis: the first, to practice writing a concise summary of an argument; and the second, to demonstrate comprehension of the complexities and nuances inherent in sophisticated discourse. The rhetorical précis includes five parts. The following outlines the information you should include in each of the five parts.

- Part 1:** Introduce the writer or speaker, the text, and the central claim.
- Part 2:** Explain how the author develops or advances the argument.
- Part 3:** State the author’s purpose in writing the text.
- Part 4:** Describe the intended audience and the author’s relationship to the audience.
- Part 5:** Explain the significance of the work.

Part 1: Introduce the writer or speaker, the text, and the central claim.

Sample

In the essay “The Space-Taker Effect,” Jenny While, a senior at El Cajon Valley High School, *argues that* students who are unmotivated and misbehave take away from the learning environment and cause teachers to slow down and lower expectations. According to While, these “space-takers take away valuable instructional time,” leaving little for those who want to learn.

Template:

In _____ , _____ , _____ ,

(type of text) (title of text) (author’s first and last name)

_____ , _____

(information about the author) (verb, e.g., claims, argues, asserts, etc.)

that _____

(Paraphrase or quote the central claim and include other essential sub-claims.)

¹Woodworth, M. (1988, Autumn). The rhetorical precis. *Rhetoric Review*, 7(1), 156-164.

Part 2: Explain how the author develops or advances the argument.

When completing this section of the précis, consider how the author has developed or supported his or her central claim. What does the writer or speaker do in each paragraph and in each section? For instance, authors will illustrate an idea, describe an event, share an anecdote, draw a comparison, or do some other work. The explanation for this section typically follows the sequence of ideas in the text.

Sample

She supports this claim by first describing the types of students who “take up space” in her school. Then, she makes a connection between her school’s poor performance on state and local exams and the “space-takers” who have done very little to prepare themselves for these high-stakes tests. Toward the end of the essay, While challenges the effectiveness of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and outlines its limitations.

Template:

_____ this claim by first _____
(He/She) (supports/develops) (Explain what the author is doing: verb.)

Then, _____
(Explain what the author does next.)

(Use a prepositional phrase like “Toward the end of the text,” “In the section,” or some other phrase in order to add variety to your writing.)

Part 3: State the author's purpose in writing the text.

Sample

While's *purpose* is to call attention to the flaws in educating all students—especially those who outwardly reject the opportunity—in order to prompt schools and districts to formulate practical solutions for low-performing students while taking care of those who want to learn.

Template:

_____ 's purpose is to _____
(author's last name)

in order to _____
(What does the author want the audience to do or feel as a result of this work?)

Part 4: Describe the intended audience and the author's relationship to the audience.

Sample

She establishes a formal tone for educators, politicians, and concerned parents who have children in high school. Although she is writing to an adult audience, her message extends to her peers—high school students.

Template:

_____ establishes _____ for _____
(He/She) (Describe the tone of the author.)

(What is the relationship between the author and his/her audience?)

Part 5: Explain the significance of this work.

Sample

This work is significant because it challenges those in education to rethink classroom dynamics. Specifically, she addresses how the various skill levels and attitudes in one classroom can affect the quality of learning.

Template:

This work is significant because _____

The complete précis

In her essay “Don’t Take Valuable Space in My School,” Jenny While, a senior at El Cajon Valley High School, *argues that* students who are unmotivated and misbehave take away from the learning environment and cause teachers to slow down and lower expectations. According to While, these “space-takers take away valuable instructional time,” leaving little for those who want to learn. *She supports this claim by first* describing the types of students who “take up space” in her school. Then, she makes a connection between her school’s poor performance on state and local exams and the “space-takers” who have done very little to prepare themselves for these high-stakes tests. *Toward the end of the essay*, While challenges the effectiveness of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and outlines its limitations. While’s *purpose* is to call attention to the flaws in educating all students—especially those who outwardly reject the opportunity—in order to prompt schools and districts to formulate practical solutions for low-performing students while taking care of those who want to learn. *She establishes* a formal tone for educators, politicians, and concerned parents who have children in high school. Although she is writing to an adult audience, her message extends to her peers—high school students. *This work is significant because* it challenges those in education to rethink classroom dynamics. Specifically, she addresses how the various skill levels and attitudes in one classroom can affect the quality of learning.