



PRECIS WRITING

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall :

- Discuss the concept and meaning of précis
- Understand how précis-writing skill can be useful to all
- Learn the qualities of a good précis

On completing the unit, you should be able to:

- Comprehend what précis-writing is
- Understand what makes a précis good and effective, and
- Use and apply the skill of précis-writing learnt here in various situations

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In our day-to-day life, many a times we need to give a lot of information in restricted space and time. In professional life too, there are many such occasions when one has to reduce incoming and outgoing correspondence to just a few words. In formal situations, time is of utmost important and therefore, one must choose words carefully while conveying any information in oral or written form. This art of presenting information in concise manner takes various forms in English language like the skills of note taking, note making, summarising and précis writing.

5.2 WHAT IS A PRÉCIS?

Précis is a French word (with /s/ silent, pronounced as 'pray-see') which can be defined as a summary of given information usually in one-third the number of words of the original. Précis writing is a very valuable art as it enables

the communicator to convey the sense of a given passage in brief by retaining the main ideas of the author and using the language of his own. It saves space and time for the reader as it retains the main ideas, avoids repetition of information and does away with the examples and analogies and gives the gist of the original writing. It is a re-statement of the main ideas of the original text in a concise written form.

5.3 USES OF A PRÉCIS

- Learning the art of précis writing can help one in different situations, like, in office. One may start applying the skill in oral communication too with practice, especially during phone conversations which saves a lot of time and confusion.
- For students too, when they have to take notes, they can exercise their skill of précis writing and do away with unnecessary data. If they do not learn this skill, their thinking and analytical abilities remain weak. Learning to write a précis helps students in making notes for exams and future reference from the lectures and books.
- Précis writing helps one to mark what is essential and what can be avoided. This skill can be useful in many tasks like noting down telephone message, preparing minutes of a meeting, drafting an advertisement, storing information for future use etc.

5.4 HOW TO WRITE A PRÉCIS

Writing a précis requires a high degree of ability to comprehend, and use analytical and editorial skills. It is first a mental act in which one takes out the leading ideas and rearranges them in about one-third of the number of words. Like any other skill-based activity, précis-writing can be divided into three phases. The tasks that one needs to perform during each phase have been explained in detail below:

1. Pre-writing Phase

- Read the passage carefully and focus on the main ideas.
- Try to understand the passage and the author's purpose.
- Underline the key phrases and prepare a list of primary and essential details.
- Prepare a rough summary based on important details.
- Examples, figures of speech and quotations may be ignored.
- Re-read the passage and compare it with your rough draft.
- Make sure that you have not left out any important ideas or vital details.

2. While preparing the précis:

- Write a summary in one or two sentence for each part of the passage in your own words.
- Arrange important ideas in logical order and start with the most vital point.

- Think of an appropriate heading and build your notes around it.
- Use your own words, taking care not to add ideas of your own.
- Do not comment or criticise the author's ideas.
- Count the words and make changes in expressions to achieve the required length.

3. Post-writing phase

- Go through your draft and make sure that no important idea has been left out.
- Correct any mistakes of grammar, spelling or punctuation.
- Finally, see that the précis has clarity, coherence and correctness.

5.5 QUALITIES OF A GOOD PRÉCIS

1. Clarity

The main purpose behind any kind of communication is to make the receiver understand what the sender wishes to convey. If the message lacks clarity, this purpose is totally marred. Therefore, it is very important that the final draft of the précis conveys the message of the original passage in very crystal-clear terms. Avoidable words and cumbersome style must be done away with in order to maintain clarity. Have a look at the examples discussed below to understand this:

- (1) Avoidable words/style: "Beg to acknowledge receipts of your letter..."
Suggested words/style: "Thank you for your letter..."
- (2) Avoidable words/style: "As soon as possible in mutual interest..."
Suggested words/style: "As soon as you can..."

2. Correctness

Two types of correctness must be observed while preparing the précis: (i) correctness of language and (ii) correctness of ideas. Correctness of language is evident when the précis is devoid of any type of grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors. Correctness of ideas is evident in the presentation of important details of the original passage in simple, clear way so that the ideas of the author do not get distorted. To achieve correctness, we should prefer concrete and not abstract words or expressions. Examples cited below will help you understand this fact:

- (1) Original expression: Fuel tank deformation was present.
Revised expression: The fuel tank was deformed.
- (2) Original expression: The reason for the popularity of slides is the simplicity of their preparation.
Revised expression: Slides are popular because they are easy to prepare.

3. Objectivity

This is a very significant feature of a good précis. The précis-writer is not required to comment or criticise the ideas presented by the author. He/she is

only expected to repeat whatever the author has expressed in a precise manner. One cannot give his own opinion or views on the subject discussed in the passage. To achieve objectivity, passive construction should be used wherever possible. If the author has made use of first person "I", it should be avoided by the précis writer.

4. Coherence

At the time of preparing the précis, one needs to use the language of his/her own to present the ideas of the author. Care needs to be taken that while arranging the important details within required length, the sequence of ideas presented follows a logical order. The précis should begin with a statement pertaining to the main idea and reflecting the title and it should end with a summing up argument. For creating a coherent piece of writing, the below-mentioned strategy may be followed:

- (1) Begin your précis with **Introducers**, i.e., sentences focusing on main idea.
- (2) Use **Developers**, i.e., sentences which support, develop and clarify the main idea.
- (3) End with **Terminators**, i.e., sentences which conclude the discussion.

5. Completeness

Précisprecisely implies a one-third presentation of the original passage. This does not, however, mean at all that one can pick up any phrases, clauses or sentences at random and cut short the size of the passage. One must pay attention to the fact that overall impact of the précis-reading is one of completeness. No critical details should be left out. The primary details must be incorporated first and then if the limit of words still permits, the secondary details should be included keeping their significance in mind.

5.6 DOS AND DON'TS OF PRÉCIS-WRITING

DOs

- The précis should be begun by highlighting the main idea.
- It must follow a logical order and all the ideas must be well-knit and well-connected.
- It must have a title.
- Important concepts, data and key words must be retained.
- Examples, unimportant explanations or quotations can be ignored.

DON'Ts

- One must not express one's own opinion, observation or criticism.
- Abbreviations or contracted forms should not be used.
- The flow of the argument of the original passage should not be disturbed by skipping vital details.
- It must not be prepared by conveniently picking up important sentences and simply putting them together.

5.7 PROCESS OF PREPARING A PRÉCIS IN A NUTSHELL

What we have learnt so far in the unit about preparing a précis can be expressed in a very compressed step-wise process as explained here:

1. Careful reading of the passage, marking the difficult words.
2. Note down at least one word to say what the passage is about. For example, Technology, Environment, etc.
3. Try to derive the meaning of difficult words through context.
4. Read the passage again and make notes of the main points.
5. Expand the main points in simple and clear sentences in your own words.
6. Do away with: repetitions, quotations, examples, figurative expressions, exclamations and questions, abbreviations and contracted forms.
7. Prepare a rough draft in your own words.
8. Count the number of words keeping in mind that: words of the title are not counted, the articles (a, an, the) are counted, a number (e.g. the year 2018) is counted as one word.
9. Frame the title expanding the one word written in step 2.
10. Revise the précis and make a fair copy with the title at the top and the number of words at the end.

5.8 LET'S LEARN THROUGH EXAMPLES

SHORT PRACTICE PASSAGES FOR PRECIS-WRITING:

1. The assault of the developed economies of the world on the economies of the poorer and developing countries goes on at an accelerated pace.
Précis: Developed countries are exploiting poorer countries even faster.
2. If you stand up and think clearly and keep going for two or three minutes, that is all that will be expected of you during your first few talks. A topic, such as why you enrolled for this course, is very easy; that is obvious. If you will spend a little time selecting and arranging your material on that topic, you will be almost sure to remember it, for you will be speaking of your own observations, your own desires, your own experiences.
Précis: Initially, you have to speak clearly for about two minutes on a simple topic: why you have joined this course? You can speak well by organising your thoughts about yourself.
3. A precarious situation has arisen in the icy parts of Kashmir. The mercury has dipped below zero and many lakes including the Dal lake have frozen. Kashmir looks like a landscape painted in white. While Kashmiris take an icy winter in their stride, this year the earthquake victims are especially hit, and are living in the open in makeshift housing.

Précis: Kashmir's icy parts are facing sub-zero temperatures with the land snow-covered and lakes frozen. This makes life hard for earthquake victims.

LONGER PRACTICE PASSAGES

1. Child labour is not a recent phenomenon. It prevailed in India as far back as three Centuries B.C., almost in the form of bonded labour. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* speaks in no uncertain terms of poor children kept as slaves in the houses of rich people. Despite efforts to control the evil of child labour, it still flourishes mostly in economically backward areas in our country.

The reasons for child labour in India are not far to seek. The prime reason for prevalence of child labour is poverty. Poverty-stricken parents, in order to supplement the meagre family income, do not feel reluctant in sending their small children for work. The children get the job involving manual work with comparative ease because they can be hired with low wages. Also, child labour is more prone to exploitation because the child cannot raise any protest against employer on account of his weaker bodily strength. Besides, child labour cannot form a union and hence the absence of union is likely to be exploited. In certain cases, employees also force female workers to bring along with them their young children to be employed with them. Another important reason for the problem of child labour is lack of educational and cultural facilities for young children. In many far-flung areas in our country, schooling facilities are scarce and inaccessible. In many places schools are not fully equipped with proper library, playing fields and other educational infrastructure and hold little attraction for children. In many cases children are forced to stay at home because their parents cannot afford educational expenses.

Children are mainly employed in the unorganised sectors like agriculture, small restaurants, construction work, carpet manufacturing, in houses as domestic servants, etc. The number of child workers in the organised sector is comparatively quite low except in match factories etc. The reason for employment of large number of children in match factories is that their small fingers are easy with match sticks and hence they work with good efficiency.

The evidence available shows that child labour in India is being exploited too much. He works for longer hours, in unhealthy conditions and for low wages. Agreed that physical work may not harm the health of child workers in all cases, but what is harmful is long and total, irrevocable subordination to their masters. What kind of men will they grow up to be as there is no place for sensitivity and love in their lives. The exploitation and ceaseless hatred for the society make these children unhappy and pessimistic about the society they live in. **(423 words)**

Précis:

The Evil of Child Labour

In India's poor parts, child labour has been existent for over 2000 years. This practice is especially widespread today. But child labour is an evil which destroys the sensitivity of youngsters. It is the result of poverty of some families and the upper hand of the upper classes. Low income families are forced to send their children to work. Improper schooling facilities and their high cost add to the problem. Children are diverted to agriculture, help in small busi-

ness or housework. Because children are unorganised, their wages are low and exploitation high. In fact children are used even in the organised sector of match factories because of their small hands and greater skill in work there. Poor mothers are required to bring their children to work. Victims of child labour grow up into dejected citizens, which is a serious concern. (140 words)

Mr. M.K. Tadvī was appointed as office assistant in V. K. Institute of Technology. The appointment letter stated that his appointment was on a temporary basis and his services could be terminated at any time with one-month notice or one-month salary in lieu of a notice. Assistant Registrar of his department observed that the performance of Mr. Tadvī was not at all satisfactory. He was neither punctual nor regular in his office. He made many mistakes in his work and often argued with his colleagues. He was found to be indifferent, irresponsible and indisciplined. Therefore, he was orally warned a number of times by his Assistant Registrar to improve his work performance. But he was never issued any written memos or notice, and nothing was kept on record by way of adverse remarks against him.

According to the Institute's rule, temporary employees became permanent automatically after two years of service. So at the end of the one year and eleven months, the Assistant Registrar gave in writing to the Director that Mr. Tadvī should be removed from his job, as he had not shown any improvement at the work-place and that he might be given one month's salary in lieu of one month's notice.

Mr. Tadvī went to the court of law stating that natural justice was not given to him as there was no adverse record against him in writing. He remarked that if he could be tolerated for one year and eleven months, he could not be regarded as totally incompetent. Mr. Tadvī further argued that the Institute did not offer enough guidance and support to him as a result of which he could not perform very well and committed mistakes at his work. The Lower Court and subsequently the High Court and the Supreme Court upheld his case and asked the Institute to reinstate the office assistant. The Institute had to do it.

The Chairperson of the Institute soon after this incident issued a confidential circular to all the Directors that in future every Director must keep detailed records of omissions and commissions made by every temporary employee and even a small error committed must be carefully recorded. (363 words)

Précis:

The Need to Maintain Written Record/ Lessons of Not Keeping a Written Record

Mr. Tadvī was temporary office assistant in V.K. Institute of Technology. His services could be terminated with one month's notice or payment of one month's salary. Tadvī was lax and careless in work, but was warned only orally, not in writing. However, he failed to improve. Two years of service would make him automatically permanent, so one month before this, he was recommended to the Director for immediate dismissal. Against this order,

Tadvi filed a case for reinstatement as his written record was good. He further argued that the Institute did not guide him properly and kept him undertrained. He won the case all the way to the Supreme Court. The Institute's chairperson issued instructions to record employee errors in writing. (123 words)

(**Note:** Examples Courtesy: *Business Communication* by V.K.Jain, OmprakashBiyani, S. Chand, 2007.)

EXERCISE

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS BY COMMENTING ON THE STATEMENTS PRESENTED HERE AND READ THE ANSWERS GIVEN AT THE END WHICH WILL ENHANCE YOUR CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE TOPIC.

- A) A précis can be easily made by selecting a few important sentences from the original passage and putting them together.
- B) Précis writing is just one topic like many others which is of no use in other aspects of academics.
- C) By learning the skill of précis writing, one can save time and money.
- D) To learn précis writing of longer passages, practising with short passages helps.

So what do you think of the statements made here? Do you agree with all of them or agree with some and disagree with some others? Your understanding will enhance in the analysis presented below:

EXPLANATION:

- A) Doing this will just be a cut and paste work and will not go in your favour. Selecting a few sentences directly will mean that some other significant details may be missed and it will harm the continuity of the précis too. Besides, the important details of the passage should be re-phrased and rewritten in the language of the précis-writer.
- B) Learning to prepare a précis helps a student in many other academic tasks like taking and making notes of a topic or a lecture. One learns to pick up essential details and to rephrase the thoughts using own language. This way, it helps in developing analytical skills and developing originality.
- C) One who has mastered the skill of précis-writing becomes good at imbibing only the essential aspects of a matter and present it in the most concise manner. This is a tool that equips one with the ability to communicate in less time and space with precision.
- D) Practising with shorter passages and moving to longer ones is the right way to effectively master the art of précis-writing. In the initial stage, one should practise summarising short pieces of writing which will help develop confidence when one moves on to longer passages.

5.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt:

- What a précis is and how it is useful in various scenarios
 - The factors to be kept in mind while preparing a good précis, and
 - To draft a précis using the writer's ideas and own words.
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5.10 KEY WORDS

Analysis: detailed examination

Comprehension: understanding, text set as test of understanding, inclusion

Concise: brief but comprehensive

Convey: transmit, carry, communicate meaning etc.

Cumbersome: inconveniently bulky

Gist: substance or essence of a matter, general drift of speech etc.

Retain: continue to have, use; keep in mind, keep possession of

Summary: brief account giving main points, brief without details or formalities

5.11 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. *Business Communication* by V.K. Jain, Omprakash Biyani, S. Chand, 2007.
2. *Developing Communication Skills* by Krishna Mohan, Meera Banerji, Macmillan, 1990.
3. *Writing With A Purpose- Functional Grammar and Writing* by Champa Tickoo, Jaya Sasikumar, Oxford University Press, 2002.
4. *Business Communication* by Urmila Rai, S. M. Rai, Himalaya Publishing House, 2006.
5. *Written Communication in English* by Sarah Freeman Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2012.