INTRODUCTION

Précis-writing, or the art of giving a concise and lucid summary of a lengthy passage of prose or poetry, is a valuable exercise and one that is frequently demanded in every business and in every profession. Next to Latin Prose Composition, it is the best means adapted for developing the power of penetration, of seizing upon the salient parts in a narrative, and expressing these in clear and vigorous speech. Whether the student is called upon to give the substance of a book, a sermon, a platform speech, or a public debate, a thorough training in précis-writing will teach him how to select everything that is of essential importance, and to discard whatever is irrelevant to the main theme, so that his summary may present the concentrated essence of what he has read or heard. It is therefore an excellent antidote to the far too prevalent habit of reading without attempting to obtain an accurate impression of the content.

How to set about writing a Précis.

The following directions have been found helpful and will repay careful study.

(1) The pupil should read the passage carefully through two or three times, consulting the dictionary for the meaning of difficult words, until he has a clear idea of its general purport. Great importance should be attached to this, for...
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until the gist of the passage is clearly grasped, it is useless
to begin writing down the abstract.

(2) When he is satisfied as to the main theme, he
should then consider the passage in detail. On careful
reading he will find that the argument generally resolves
itself into certain well-defined sections. He should observe
carefully the connection between them and write down a
suitable heading for each section.

(3) The next step is to select the points of importance
that must be incorporated in the précis, and to exclude
whatever is not essential to the subject of the original.
And here the following caution cannot be too strongly
emphasised. Most pupils are under the impression that it
is sufficient to select at random a few detached sentences
from the extract, and string these together without any
attempt at continuity. Such results are useless. The pupil
must bear in mind that the one all-important rule in précis-
writing is that his summary must present an intelligible
account of the substance of the original to a person who has
not the original to consult. Hence, as it is only the con-
centrated essence of the original that must be retained, he
should note carefully:

(a) No additional matter is to be inserted by way of
personal comment or historical explanation.

(b) All superfluous details such as long quotations
or lengthy enumerations, added merely to illustrate the
argument, must be omitted. For instance in Exercise 38,
Part II, he must not enumerate the various countries or
recount the different reforms mentioned by Macaulay in
his sketch of the progress of England. Rhetorical figures
of speech such as metaphors, similes, and personifications
will also disappear.
(c) Poetical passages, which usually abound in figurative expressions require careful consideration; for while poetical ornament is generally to be excluded, the diction must not be so bald as to be entirely shorn of the dignity of the original.

(4) When the process of selection and elimination is finished, the pupil should now proceed to weave the various ideas into a concise and lucid narrative. To do this effectively requires considerable experience in the use of felicitous and comprehensive terms. It is also advisable to construct a preliminary draft of the précis, taking care at this stage that all the salient points of the original are incorporated.

(5) Further, the narrative will not be lucid unless the principle of continuity is observed. It is not sufficient that the sentences should express the ideas of the different sections as briefly as possible, but they must also follow each other in logical sequence, and be welded together by means of suitable connectives into a vigorous and organic whole.

When the first draft is completed, the pupil should carefully read it through, when he will probably find that further condensation is possible, before the final draft is written.

(6) Length of Précis. No hard and fast rule can be laid down as to the relative length of a précis, as extracts differ considerably in their structure and content. In practice, however, it will be found that the majority of the short passages in Part I of this book, can be reduced to about one-third of the original, while the substance of most of the longer passages in Parts II and III should be expressed in about one-fifth of their present length.
(7) **Tense and Person.** In the Exercises contained in this book the tense of the original should remain unchanged except in the extracts from Shakespeare and No. 59, Part III. (In the case, however, of complicated correspondence, such as is usually set at Civil Service Examinations, the incidents described refer to the past, and therefore the past tense should be used throughout.)

It is advisable that the third person should be used in précis-writing, unless it is found that the form of the original extract does not admit of its being converted into indirect speech.

(8) Finally, the cardinal requirements of a good précis may be summed up in three words: clearness, coherence, brevity, and the greatest of these is clearness.

A few typical examples of varied difficulty are here discussed and a model précis appended to each in order to illustrate the application of the above directions.
Example 1.

No degree of knowledge attainable by man is able to set him above the want of hourly assistance, or to extinguish the desire of fond endearments and tender officiousness; and therefore no one should think it unnecessary to learn those arts by which friendship may be gained. Kindness is preserved by a constant reciprocation of benefits or interchange of pleasures; but such benefits only can be bestowed as others are capable to receive, and such pleasures only imparted, as others are qualified to enjoy.

Dr Johnson, Rambler.

The main purport of the passage is:

The preservation of friendship.

The piece divides itself naturally into two paragraphs; the first extending as far as “gained”; and the second from “Kindness” to the end.

The main purport of each paragraph respectively is:

(1) The offices of friendship are indispensable.
(2) How to preserve friendship.

The précis of the whole will be:

As the services of friends are indispensable even to men of the highest intellectual attainments, we should cultivate friendship by the interchange of such kindnesses as are mutually acceptable.
Example II.

Enter Shylock

Duke. Make room and let him stand before our face:
Shylock, the world thinks and I think so too,
That thou but lead'st this fashion of thy malice
To the last hour of act; and then 'tis thought
Thou'lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange
Than is thy strange apparent cruelty;
And where thou now exact'st the penalty,
Which is a pound of this poor merchant's flesh,
Thou wilt not only loose the forfeiture,
But, touched with human gentleness and love
Forgive a moiety of the principal;
Glancing an eye of pity on his losses,
That have of late so huddled on his back,
Enough to press a royal merchant down
And pluck commiseration of his state
From brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint,
From stubborn Turks and Tartars, never trained
To offices of tender courtesy.
We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.

Shylock. I have possess'd your grace of what I purpose,
And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond:
If you deny it, let the danger light
Upon your charter, and your city's freedom.
You'll ask me, why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats: I'll not answer that:
Example II.

The title of the whole passage will be:

Shylock's defence before the Duke.

In passages like the above, the tendency of most pupils is to construct the précis in the form of a dialogue in the first person, giving a separate summary of what is spoken by each person. This method should be avoided. The substance of the several speeches should be combined into one continuous narrative, written in the third person.

The dialogue comprises two sections. The last six lines of the Duke's speech, as the pupil will readily see, add nothing that is essential to the substance of the passage, and may, therefore, be omitted in the précis. The prominent idea is the Duke's appeal to Shylock to waive his claim to the forfeit, and remit a portion of the original loan. The heading for this section is therefore:

The Duke's appeal to Shylock for mercy.

Shylock's reply is considerably more difficult to summarise. Particular mention must not be made in the précis of the various animals, and the feelings of dislike they engender in different persons, but these details must be summarised by means of some comprehensive phrase. The main ideas are (a) Shylock's refusal; (b) the explanation of his hatred for Antonio. The heading for this section therefore may be expressed thus:

Shylock's refusal and his explanation.
Example II. (continued)

But say it is my humour: is it answer'd?
What if my house be troubled with a rat,
And I be pleas'd to give ten thousand ducats
To have it baned? What, are you answer'd yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
Some that are mad if they behold a cat;
And others at the bagpipe; for affection,
Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be render'd
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig;
Why he, a harmless necessary cat;
Why he, a woollen bagpipe;
So can I give no reason, nor I will not
More than a lodg'd hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him. Are you answer'd?

Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice.
Example II. (continued)

Bearing in mind therefore the above directions, we shall express our final précis somewhat as follows:

Addressing Shylock, the Duke expressed the general expectation that he would at the last moment waive his claim to the pound of flesh, and moreover, out of consideration for the merchant's heavy losses would remit a portion of the original loan. Shylock, in reply, insisted on the execution of the bond, adding that such strange idiosyncrasies as the instinctive dislike felt by some towards certain animals were inexplicable, and of such a nature was his antipathy to Antonio.
Example III.

Lift—lift ye mists, from off the silent coast
Folded in endless winter's chill embraces;
Unshrouded for us awhile our brave ones lost;
Let us behold their faces:

In vain: the North has hid them from our sight;
The snow their winding sheet—their only dirges
The groan of icebergs in the Polar night,
Racked by the savage surges.

No funeral torches, which a smoky glare
Shone a farewell upon their shrouded faces;
No monumental pillar tall and fair,
Towers o'er their resting places.

But northern streamers flare the long night through
Over the cliffs stupendous, fraught with peril,
Of icebergs, tinted with a ghostly hue
Of amethyst and beryl.

No human tears upon their graves are shed—
Tears of domestic love or pity holy;
But snowflakes from the gloomy sky o'erhead
Down shuddering, settle slowly.

Yet history shrines them with her mighty dead,
The hero seamen of this isle of Britain;
And, when the brighter scroll of Heaven is read
There will their names be written.

Hood, The Lost Expedition with Franklin.