

## Writing an Abstract, Précis, or Summary

A **précis** or **abstract** is a brief summary of the essential view, facts, or statements in an article, chapter, or book. Learning to condense a longer text into a paragraph length synopsis that uses your own words is a crucial skill. Indeed, summarizing other writers' viewpoints, perspectives or data is one of the key techniques students use to write effective papers.

The **purpose** of this exercise is to give you practice in writing a summary paragraph that summarizes a longer article from a magazine, journal, or book.

### Works Cited:

Author's name (last name first). Title of article. Primary source (Date): page number. Rpt. in Title of Book. Author. City: Publishing Co., Year published. Page numbers.

### EXAMPLE:

Goddard, Harold C. "A Pre-Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, XII, No. 1 (June 1957): 6-33. Rpt. in *The Turn of the Screw*. Henry James. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999. 161-168.

### Procedure:

1. Read the essay or article to understand the contents.
2. Gather information for your writing by answering the following questions.
  - A. What is the article's exact title? Underline or *italicize* titles of books; put "quotation marks" around chapters or essays. What is the author's/writer's name? In what book was this article first published? City of publication? Copyright date?
  - B. What is the main subject of the essay?
  - C. Does the writer express his/her own bias or viewpoint toward the subject?  
If so, what is it?
  - D. List FIVE to SEVEN pieces of evidence, views from the writer, or details that the writer presents on the topic.
  - E. How does the essay end?
3. Write a paragraph in your own words that presents the answers from above as a summary.
  - A. Write **ONE** sentence that combines your answers to A above. This is your assertion or introductory statement.

**Example:** In the article "A Pre-Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*" published in Norton's Critical edition of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry C. Goddard presents the governess as not only psychotic, but also as an unreliable narrator.
  - B. Write eight middle sentences that present your answers to B, C, D, and E under procedure. You may use compound or complex sentences to present the information.
  - C. Write a final sentence summarizing the conclusion.

## Sample Precis:

Name

Shank

AP Lit 1

5 November 2012

### Voltaire's *Candide*

Beck, Earvin. "Voltaire's *Candide*." *Explicator* 57.4 (Summer 1999): 203-204. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Vol. 112. Detroit: Gale, 2008. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale. Web. 11 Oct. 2011.

In the article "Voltaire's *Candide*" published in *Short Story Criticism*, Earvin Beck argues that Voltaire utilizes the schematized structure of *Candide* to advocate philosophical skepticism. Voltaire's book is divided into three sections of equal length which "create a symbolic geography for Candide's quest." Candide travels to these three worlds which represent aspects of the philosophies during Voltaire's time period. Europe represents evil, while America, the New World, represents new possibilities such as his time spent in El Dorado, and then finally to Turkey which represents the truth of both the New and Old Worlds, "the evil of Europe and the fruitful human effort of El Dorado." El Dorado appears in the middle of the book and is the "geographically most elevated point in Candide's travels." El Dorado, the most perfect place on earth, is the unreachable goal that all men seek yet seldom find. The world is flawed and man needs to stop searching for a utopia. Besides traveling to three worlds, Candide also has three guides. The first guide, Pangloss, represents "philosophical optimism." Martin is exactly the opposite in that he represents "philosophical pessimism." While Pangloss feels "reality can be known by reason," Martin feels "reality defies a rational accounting." On the other hand, Cacambo is a "neoclassical golden mean" who takes a standing somewhere in the middle of optimism and pessimism showing the skepticism of mankind. He is also the most silent of the three, and the most practical. He upholds the ideal of an "efficient man who knows what needs to be done and sets about doing it." He is the "norm" between the other philosophies. The irony lies in Cacambo's name being the Spanish *caca*, meaning "excrement." Thus, since man cannot attain the richness of life in El Dorado, he must settle for a life filled with excrement. Thus, Beck illustrates Voltaire's response to those who go to extremes and stresses the point that moderation is the key (1-2).