

## Two Types of Summaries: the Abstract and Précis

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Summarizing an essay can give you a more complete understanding of the words and main ideas that are used in that essay. Identifying an essay's main ideas can provide insights into the author's arguments, credibility, and tone. Students who can summarize or outline an essay will have a better understanding of their research, and better able to select quotes from these essays that will carry the greatest impact.

### § DEFINITION

**abstract** — An abstract is a shortened form of a written selection using only the most important words and ideas found in that essay.

- ▶ An abstract should retain the author's exact words, phrases, content, tone, and style, with no attempt at creativity, explanation, or embellishment.
- ▶ Only the most essential phrases and statements should be highlighted and removed from the original text to be placed in an abstract.

**NOTE:** Many GALILEO databases use a 1-3-sentence abstract to summarize each news article, although these summaries may sometimes be préces or other interpretations.

**NOTE:** Page 2 of an APA Style paper should be an abstract of the essay to follow. The sample essay in *Rules for Writers* (485-494) fails to show one.

**ALSO:** Visit the web page from Rensselaer for alternative instructions for writing abstracts:

- ▶ <http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/abstracts.html>

### § DEFINITION

**précis** — A précis is an abstract that you rewrite into your own words. Essentially, a précis is a paraphrase of your abstract.

- ▶ A good précis contains the most important ideas from an author's essay, but stated in original diction that is distinct from the author's phraseology.  
**All other requirements for the abstract apply to the précis.**
- ▶ A précis is perhaps the most useful kind of summary: It can help you in every class and on every test and essay. Most students are already familiar with this, since it is the most common note-taking method.
- ▶ A précis has two key advantages over an abstract: **1)** its readability is improved because you have full control over its wording; and **2)** the note-taker can better remember and understand the annotated material (because you have to think about the words and ideas more thoroughly).

## Similarities Between an Abstract and a Précis

- ▶ Both abstracts and *précés* condense the author's text, retain the main ideas and arguments, and maintain the purpose and tone of the original essay.
- ▶ Both leave out all minor arguments, petty details, and most statistics and figures. Likewise, questions, witty banter, parenthetical expressions, and specific examples should be most likely left out of any summary.
- ▶ Abstracts and *précés* are supposed to be extremely short: never exceed 10-20% of the original essay's length when writing either type of summary. In many cases, exceeding 10% of the original length might be too much.

### CAUTION!

Always incorporate the **thesis**, main **topic sentences**, and important **conclusions** into both types of summaries.

### FOR YOUR INFORMATION

You may need to conduct an **identification outline** before you summarize any essay if you are having trouble identifying the main ideas (thesis, topic sentences).

## Differences Between an Abstract and a Précis

- ▶ Abstracts contain the author's exact words, while *précés* contain the reader's natural language, paraphrased from the original.

### CAUTION!

The writer of a **précis** must change the author's words into the reader's individual, familiar, or comfortable vocabulary (without changing the author's original meaning).

- ▶ The writer of an abstract may take liberties only to join parts of several disconnected sentences together to form a comprehensive statement. The writer may add transitions and other appropriate language only to maintain the readability of the abstract. Writers of a *précis* will naturally connect the main ideas to promote strong readability.

### FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Therefore, **abstracts** will sound stilted, choppy, and sometimes unfinished; **précés** will always be easier to read because the author's language is revised to improve its clarity.