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PART I



Practical writing



Précis

KEY TERMS

précis 摘要
summary 摘要

Introduction

A précis is a brief statement, in your own words, of a speech or a piece of writing (an essay, a report, a newspaper article, a chapter in a book, etc.) giving only the main ideas of the original.

Précis writing is of great educational value to students. First, it develops passive language skills by training students read actively and accurately. In order to detect the main points of a passage and its pattern of thought, students have to thoroughly understand it and become aware of the logic underlying the passage. Thus they read more actively and accurately than they usually do.

Second, it is a good way to practice writing. The précis requires brevity and clarity. To write a good précis, students have to put ideas in the briefest and clearest possible grammatical structures. Therefore, précis writing teaches them to choose their words carefully and express their ideas clearly, concisely, and logically.

Thirdly, précis writing can also sharpen students' skills in grasping the main idea of the original, organizing information, and expressing themselves in idiomatic English. After mastering the art of writing a précis, they will be able to take notes more carefully and accurately

when writing minutes, reports, or research papers where it is often necessary for them to introduce what others say or write in the fewest possible words.

Furthermore, *précis* writing can train students to take various kinds of tests. As an excellent testing tool, *précis* writing has been used in proficiency tests and entrance examinations such as TEM4, TEM8, and so on. Therefore, learning to write *précis* directly benefits students in test taking.

The *précis* and its synonyms

Before the discussion of how to write a *précis*, it is necessary to distinguish *précis* from its three synonyms: *summary*, *abstract*, and *synopsis*.

In the broad sense, the term *précis* can be defined as a summary, both referring to a brief statement of the main points of something longer. But in the strict sense, *précis* is usually used in a more specialized way to designate a particular type of summarizing exercise used for academic purposes. There are several differences between a *précis* and a summary.

First, a *précis* states only the thought of the original, but the writer of a summary is free to interpret the material and to comment on it if the writer makes clear that he or she is doing so. Therefore, the writer of a summary can write in his or her own voice, referring to the original author(s) by name, or as *he*, *she*, or *they*. The writer of a summary can also integrate the summary with information about the original author(s), the evaluation of the worth of the original, or the discussion of its methods or goals.

Second, a *précis* follows the order and the proportion of the material in the original, whereas the writer of a summary is relatively free to change the order and proportion if he or she wishes to do so. As a result, the writer of a summary may put more emphasis on the parts of the original material that are most appropriate for his or her audience and purpose, provided that the writer does not falsify the original or mislead the audience about its true nature.

Third, a *précis* can only give the main points of one piece of material at a time, while a summary can bring several pieces of material together as a group. Therefore, the summary is often used in book reviews or research papers to blend analyses of the authors or the original material.

In spite of the above differences, people often use the word *summary* loosely to refer to *précis*. So when you are required to write a summary, you should pay special attention to the instructions to learn whether the writing task requires a *précis* or a loose summary.

The two other synonyms of *précis*—*abstract* and *synopsis*—are more easily distinguishable from *précis* than *summary*. An abstract is a summary of the major points presented in reports, papers, or other scholarly or legal documents. An abstract is usually written by the writer of the document and is published along with the document itself. A synopsis, by contrast, is a short account of something longer, especially the story of a film, play, or book.

This unit focuses on how to write a précis.

Activity 1

Read each of the following paragraphs (which are brief statements of the main points of a longer essay) and then tell whether it is a précis or a summary.

1. The problem of overuse in our national parks was caused by a change in people's attitudes toward the wilderness between 1990 and 2010. The park service has implemented two solutions: limitations emphasizing quantity and limitations emphasizing quality. The heart of the problem and of the solutions is that everyone must compromise.

2. The essay opens with two contrasted personal experiences that show how the national parks changed for the better between 1990 and 2015. The writer examines the causes and effects of the change, and suggests effective remedies.

Guidelines for précis writing

A good précis should possess such features as being complete, brief, faithful, and coherent. In order to achieve those qualities, précis writing should follow the following guidelines.

(1) Completeness

Include all of the main points. Omission of a main point may lead to misunderstanding of the original material. All the main ideas reproduced from the original should form a compact whole and convey a sense of unity.

(2) Brevity

State the important ideas and omit the specifics. Record the bare bones of the original, leaving out repetition, examples, detailed descriptions, subordinate ideas, and modifiers. Use the most economical possible wording.

(3) Faithfulness

Write accurately and faithfully. Report exactly what you read in the order in which it is presented. Write as though the original author were explaining his or her own ideas to readers. Do not include your personal comments or opinions. For example, instead of saying *This article is about...* you should simply state the idea of the material.

(4) Proportion

Follow the proportion of the original material. If the original devoted 70 percent of its content to one idea and only 30 percent to the other, your précis should reflect that emphasis.

(5) Tone

Maintain the same tone of the original. If the original material is humorous, you should use an informal tone in your précis writing to indicate that the original is humorous. Similarly, if the original material is a serious, use a factual, objective tone in your précis.

(6) The form of speech

A précis is always written in the indirect form of speech except in very rare cases where you cannot do justice to the author of the original without quoting a few words in their original forms.

(7) Coherence

Write clear, continuous sentences that go smoothly from one sentence to another. Your précis must not be a patchwork (拼凑之物) of phrases and sentences quoted from the original. Instead, you should learn to paraphrase, or express the meanings of the original in your own words by varying the sentence structures, using synonyms, or changing the voice.

(8) Length

Observe the word limit given in the instruction. Often the required précis is about one third or one fourth the length of the original. Do not go beyond the word limit, but do include enough information to convey all the main ideas.

Activity 2

Paraphrase the following sentences.

1. Thin people come in all personalities.

2. Obviously there is nothing to do except perhaps curse the day that one was born.

3. A shop with no front showed its contents, public and private, clear through the rear window.

4. He genuinely wished to hold on to his temper; his scenes with me had taken a great deal out of him.

5. The entire cinema would explode into catcalls and foot stamping, calling dramatic attention to the irksome distortion of pictures.

The process of writing a précis

When writing a précis, you can refer to the following steps.

- (1) Read the instructions carefully to find out what you are exactly required to do.
- (2) Read the original material carefully twice. Search for the main points. Find out the meanings of the words you do not know by using your dictionary.
- (3) Determine which parts of the original are essential and which parts serve only as transitions or nonessential details.
- (4) Highlight the main points (key words or phrases) or write them down in a list.
- (5) On the basis of the main points and your own interpretation of the main idea, write the rough draft of the précis, referring to the original only when you want to make sure of some points. This will help you reproduce the content of the original in your own words.
- (6) Read through the rough draft carefully, making any change you think necessary and bringing the number of words down to the set limit.
- (7) Write a fair copy of your précis in a single paragraph, stating the exact number of words you have used at the end of your précis if required.
- (8) Give your précis a title.

When you revise your précis, always remember the guidelines for précis writing stated in the previous section. You should, especially, bear two important points in mind. First, your précis must be accurate. You must learn to derive all your information from the original and never distort its meaning or add to it. Second, your précis should be written in such a way that it reads as a continuous paragraph. To achieve this, you should use devices, especially transitional expressions like *but*, *and*, *however*, *though*, *even if*, *also*, and so on, to connect your points.

Two methods to highlight main points

There are mainly two methods to highlight the main points of certain material: the parenthesizing method and the underlining method.

The parenthesizing method

Follow the steps below when you use the parenthesizing method to mark the main points of certain material.

- (1) Read through the material and put in parentheses the words, phrases, or sentences that you think unimportant and therefore can be left out.
- (2) Rewrite the material on the basis of the words and sentences that are left, adding words

where needed, shortening word groups where substitution is possible, and linking sentences together smoothly.

(3) Read through your draft once more, make any further changes, and rewrite it.

The following is a passage to be précised within 65 words.



Transportation

Have you ever thought about how important transportation is to the world? Without transportation modern life could not exist. We would have to get or make our own food, our own clothes, even our books, newspapers, and mail. Everything that we have come to depend on is brought to us by transportation. Even the water that we drink is transported through pipelines from wells and reservoirs to our homes and offices. We have come to depend on the availability of three principal kinds of transportation: land, sea, and air. Automobiles, railroads, trucks, and pipelines are the principal means of land transportation. Just think how paralyzed our society would be without any mechanical means of land transportation! We would have to depend, once again, on animals such as donkeys, horses, oxen, camels, or even dogs (like the Eskimos). Instead of streetcars, subways, buses, bicycles, and taxis, we would have to rely on our own feet. Ships, barges, and submarines form the chief means of water transportation, carrying people and goods across (even under) oceans, seas, and lakes, and along big and small rivers. Without our principal means of air transportation, the airplane, we would have to slow down our lives and commerce. It would not be possible to mail a letter in Istanbul in the morning and have it delivered to New York in the evening. We could not breakfast in San Francisco and have dinner in Paris. Other means of air transportation such as helicopters and supersonic passenger jets will bring the people of the world into even closer contact.

By using the parenthesizing method, you may mark the above passage like the following.



Transportation

(Have you ever thought about how) important transportation (is to the world? Without transportation) modern life (could not exist. We would have to get or make our own food, our own clothes, even our books, newspapers, and mail.) Everything (that) we (have come to) depend on is brought to us by transportation. (Even the water that we drink is transported through pipelines from wells and reservoirs to our homes and offices.) We (have come to) depend on (the availability of) three principal kinds of transportation: land, sea, and air. (Automobiles, railroads, trucks, and pipelines are the principal means of land transportation. Just think how) paralyzed our society (would be) without (any mechanical means of) land transportation! (We would have to) depend, (once again,) on animals (such as donkeys, horses, oxen, camels, or even dogs [like the Eskimos]. Instead of streetcars, subways, buses, bicycles, and taxis, we would have to rely on) our own feet. (Ships, barges, and submarines form the chief means of) water transportation, carrying people and goods across (even under) oceans, seas, and lakes, and along (big and small) rivers. Without (our principal

means of air transportation,) the airplane, (we would have to) slow down our lives and commerce. (It would not be possible to mail a letter in Istanbul in the morning and have it delivered to New York in the evening. We could not breakfast in San Francisco and have dinner in Paris.) Other means of air transportation (such as helicopters and supersonic passenger jets will) bring the people of the world (into even) closer (contact).

When the content in parentheses are deleted, the words left can be combined to make a draft précis as illustrated below.



Transportation

Transportation is important to modern life. Everything we depend on is brought to us by it. We depend on three principal kinds of transportation: land, sea, and air. Our society would be paralyzed without land transportation. We would have to depend on animals and our own feet. Water transportation carries people and goods across oceans, seas, etc. Without the airplane, we would have to slow down our lives and commerce. Other means of air transportation bring the people of the world closer.

More compression, substitution, and rewriting can produce a unified and coherent version of the above précis as follows.



Transportation

Transportation is essential to modern life because it brings us everything we need. There are three principal kinds of transportation: land, sea, and air. The mechanical means of land transportation release us from depending on animals and our own feet; water transportation carries people and goods across various waters; and air transportation speeds up our lives and commerce and brings people closer.

The underlining method

Follow the steps below when you use the underlining method to mark the main points of certain material.

- (1) Read through the material and underline its key words, phrases, or sentences. Leave out any unnecessary content.
- (2) Write a draft précis, using the underlined parts and changing certain words to suit your own word preference.
- (3) Read through your précis once more, make any further changes, and rewrite it.

In your précis writing, you can use a combination of both methods, as illustrated in the following passage.



The Development of Writing

(Few people would disagree with the belief that primitive man learned to speak long before they developed a system of writing. But while their early spoken language may have been nothing more than a few sounds, early men could transmit messages across distances by means of signals from drums, smoke, and fire. It was probably) a desire to record messages (that) led to the development of alphabets. (Early men,

who could speak and who could send messages, could not put those messages into a permanent form. The desire to have permanent records may not be easily understood in today's world where electronic science has made recordings commonplace. If early men wanted to leave records of past events to remind them of the good times and the bad, they had to depend on their memory, and on primitive markings such as piles of stones, cuttings on sticks, etc. The limitations of this system led early men to turn to rock drawings for the expression of more sophisticated ideas. (This form of writing depended on pictures to convey ideas, and although it is more advanced than previous developments, it was still too limited for men to be entirely satisfied. Finally, men were able to develop a system of) picture writing (that associated symbols and sounds. This system, which was) originated by the Sumerians and the Egyptians by about 3000 B.C., (is based on the same principle that we use today in most world alphabets. It was) in about 1000 B.C. (that) the Phoenicians took the (complicated) picture alphabets of the Egyptians and simplified them into 22 symbols, (each one standing for a) consonant sound. (Finally,) the ancient Greeks, in about 800 B.C., refined this Phoenician alphabet and added signs for vowel sounds. The alphabet used in English, and in many other languages, is called the Roman alphabet because it was developed by the Romans who had taken over most of it from (another Italic people,) the Etruscans, who, (in their turn,) had learned it from the ancient Greeks. (Letters on ancient monuments in Rome prove that the) Roman alphabet, (the same alphabet used) today, (had been) perfected by around 114 A.D.

The following is the final précis of the above passage.



The Development of Writing

The desire to record messages led to the development of alphabets. First, rock drawings appeared to express ideas. By about 3000 B.C., the Sumerians and the Egyptians developed picture writing. It was simplified by the Phoenicians into about 30 symbols for consonant sounds in about 1000 B.C. Then the ancient Greeks refined it by adding signs for vowel sounds in about 800 B.C. Through the Etruscans, the Romans took over most of the Greek alphabet and developed the Roman alphabet by around 114 A.D. It is now used in English and other languages.

Activity 3

In the following passage, the main points have been underlined. Join them into a continuous paragraph of no more than 40 words.

Automation is a term which describes the use of machines to control other machines. The process of automation is expected to increase production and to improve our standard of living. Certain forms of automatic equipment have been used by the auto industry for many years to move materials to the assembly lines. Ford Motor Company now uses some automatic controls. At its engine plant in

Cleveland, rough cylinder blocks go through a series of 530 automatic operations and come out as finished products in just under 15 minutes.

While many labor leaders fear that automation will cause workers to lose jobs, scientists say it will demand more workers to maintain and to repair the automatic machines.

Strategies to grasp main points

How do you decide what are the main points and what are transitional and inessential details? The following are a few strategies to use when you make these decisions.

(1) Pay attention to the title and the subtitle.

The title and the subtitle of a material often summarize what the material is about. Think about how they may condense the meaning of the material. Take the passage “The Development of Writing” as an example. The title implies that the passage will discuss the different stages in the development of writing history. Therefore, when searching for the main points, you should focus on looking for the answers to four questions: *who* invented *what* types of writing at *what time*, and *how*. If you can find statements or details in the passage that answer the above four questions, you have grasped the main points. All those details about the early spoken language of primitive men and about how they sent messages are thus unimportant and can be left out.

(2) Identify the topic sentence of each paragraph.

Most English paragraphs, especially expository ones, have topic sentences. A topic sentence usually appears at or near the beginning of the paragraph and states its main idea. Once you have the main idea in your mind, it is easy for you to find main subdivisions that support the main idea. For example, in the passage “Transportation,” the topic sentence is the second sentence, *Without transportation modern life could not exist*, from which we can derive the main idea *Transportation is essential to modern life*. Therefore, when summarizing the three principal kinds of transportation (main subdivisions), you should focus on their importance in modern life instead of the specific ways of transportation. The following précis fails to grasp the main points of the passage.



Transportation

Transportation is important to modern life. Everything we depend on is brought to us by transportation. There are three principal kinds of transportation: land, sea, and air. Automobiles, railroads, trucks, and pipelines are the principal means of land transportation. Ships, barges, and submarines form the chief means of water transportation. Airplanes, helicopters, and supersonic passenger jets are the principal means of air transportation.

(3) Reduce examples and modifiers to the essential minimum.

If the writer of the original material uses an example or statistics to illustrate a point, you may refer to it briefly in your précis. Very often you may omit it altogether. Never attempt to give the details of an example. And leave out words, phrases, or sentences that merely restate or reinforce a point already made. For example, in the passage "Transportation," the third sentence *We would have to get or make our own food, our own clothes, even our books, newspapers, and mail* is a specific example that illustrates the point *Without transportation modern life could not exist*; the sentence *Even the water that we drink is transported through pipelines from wells and reservoirs to our homes and offices* reinforces the idea *Everything that we have come to depend on is brought to us by transportation*. Therefore, they can be omitted in the précis. Also, modifiers such as adjectives and adverbs generally contribute little to the main idea and thus can be deleted in a précis.

Activity 4

Read the following passage, underline the main points, and then write a précis of no more than 100 words.

Bad Habits

It is very easy to acquire bad habits, such as eating too many sweets or too much food, drinking too much fluid of any kind, or smoking. The more we do a thing, the more we tend to like doing it; if we do not continue to do it, we feel unhappy. This is called the force of habit, and the force of habit should be fought against.

Things which may be very good when only done from time to time, tend to become very harmful when done too often and too much. This even applies to such good things as work or rest. Some people form a bad habit of working too much, and others idling too much. The wise man always remembers that this is true of him and checks any bad habit. He says to himself, "I'm now becoming idle," "I like too many sweets," or "I smoke too much," and then adds, "I will get myself out of this bad habit at once."

One of the most widely spread bad habits is the use of tobacco. Tobacco is now smoked or chewed by men, by women, and even by children, almost all over the world. It was brought into Europe from America by Sir Walter Raleigh, about four centuries ago, and has hence spread everywhere. I very much doubt whether there is any good in this habit, even when tobacco is not used to excess, and it is

- 1** Read the following passage and then answer the questions below by writing a précis of no more than 75 words.

The Value of Education

Education is not an end, but a means to an end. In other words, we do not educate children only for the purpose of educating them; our purpose is to fit them for life. As soon as we realize this fact, we will understand that it is very important to choose a system of education which will really prepare children for life. It is not enough just to choose the first system of education one finds or to continue with one's old system of education without examining it to see whether it is in fact suitable or not.

In many modern countries it has for some time been fashionable to think that, by free education for all—whether rich or poor, clever or stupid—all the problems of society can be solved and a perfect nation can be built. But we can already see that free education for all is not enough: We find in such places a far larger number of people with university degrees than the available jobs for them to fill. Because of their degrees, they refuse to do what they consider "low" work; and, in fact, work with the hands is thought to be dirty and shameful in such places.

But we only have to think for a moment to understand that the work of a completely uneducated farmer can be far more important than that of a professor: We can live without education, but we die if we have no food. If no one cleaned our streets and took the rubbish away from our houses, we would get terrible diseases.

In fact, when we say that all of us must be educated to fit us for life, it means that we must be educated in such a way that, firstly, everyone can do whatever job that is suited to his or her intelligence and ability, and, secondly, we can realize that all jobs are necessary to society, and that it is very bad to be ashamed of one's own work, or to scorn someone else's. Only such a type of education can be called valuable to society.

1. What does the writer think education is for?
2. How does the writer disagree with the system considered fashionable in many modern countries?

2 Read the following news excerpt carefully and then write a response of no less than 200 words in which you should first summarize the main message of the news excerpt and then comment on the rule banning electronic devices in the pub. You can support yourself with information from the excerpt.

Pub Chain Bans Phones to Protect “Social Conversation”

U.K. pub chain Samuel Smith’s has reportedly banned customers from using mobile phones, iPads, and laptops in the pub.

A memo sent out to managers says the brewery’s policy is “not to allow customers to use mobile phones, laptops, or similar devices inside our pubs.” It states that if a customer receives a call, then he or she should go outside to take it in the same way as it is required with smoking. Whether outside or inside, tablets and iPads must be prohibited. It also declares that customers must not be allowed to receive transmitted pictures of sport or download music on the brewery’s premises either inside or outside.

The brewery’s policy is that “the pubs are for social conversation person to person.” It follows a similar rule that banned swearing in the chain’s 300 pubs. The strange rules are said to be enforced by the company’s 73-year-old owner, who is rumored to enter the pubs undercover to check that they are being kept to.

One pub manager said that while it can be “detrimental” to have people on the phone, any restriction should be informal and policed by the individuals themselves rather than being a strict rule.

摘要的定义

摘要即用自己的语言对短文、报告、报刊文章或图书章节等进行的要点概述。

摘要写作的意义

- 1) 提升学生阅读的积极性和准确性;
- 2) 训练学生在写作时做到措辞正确, 表达简练, 合乎逻辑;
- 3) 增强学生捕捉要点、组织信息、表情达意、记录笔记的能力;
- 4) 训练学生参加各种考试的能力。

近义词辨析

- 1) **précis** 遵循原文的顺序和比例, 且只陈述原文内容, 不对原文进行评论;
- 2) **summary** 可以不遵循原文的顺序和比例, 可以对原文进行评论;
- 3) **abstract** 是对报告、论文或其他学术类或法律类文件等的摘要陈述;
- 4) **synopsis** 是电影、剧本或书籍等的故事梗概。

摘要写作的原则

- 1) 陈述所有要点;
- 2) 省略细节(包括重复、例子、细节描写、修饰语等);
- 3) 忠实于原文, 不要掺入摘要写作者自己的评论;
- 4) 各部分的比例要与原文一致;
- 5) 语气要与原文一致;
- 6) 引用原文内容时通常使用间接引语;
- 7) 使用写作者自己的语言, 前后连贯;
- 8) 遵守字数要求; 摘要通常为原文字数的三分之一或四分之一。

摘要写作的步骤

- 1) 认真阅读题目指令, 了解题目要求;
- 2) 认真阅读原文两遍, 搜寻要点, 不认识的单词可查阅词典;
- 3) 判断哪些部分是要点, 哪些只是过渡语或不重要的细节;
- 4) 标注好要点, 或将要点一条一条列出来; 可用括号法将不重要的单词、短语或句子放进括号, 可用下划线法将要点(单词、短语或句子)划出, 也可两种方法并用;
- 5) 根据列出的要点和对主旨的理解撰写摘要的初稿;
- 6) 阅读摘要的初稿, 进行必要的修改, 并控制好字数;

- 7) 将摘要誊写成一段；
- 8) 为摘要确定题目。

捕捉原文要点的策略

- 1) 关注原文的标题和副标题，因为它们往往是原文主旨思想的缩影；
- 2) 找出各段的主题句，因为主题句往往阐述了所在段落的要点；
- 3) 尽量省略例子或修饰语；若原文使用了例子，可简要在摘要中提及，但更多情况下则可全部省略；重复性的词句及大多数修饰语也可删除。