



Writing an Argument Summary: *Rhetorical Précis*

Students must learn how to analyze arguments—whether they are written or spoken—and accurately describe the rhetorical techniques used in the work. One way to prepare students for this type of thinking is to engage them in a reading and writing exercise called a rhetorical précis. There are two purposes for a rhetorical précis: the first, to practice writing a concise summary of an argument; and the second, to demonstrate comprehension of the complexities and nuances inherent in sophisticated discourse. The rhetorical précis includes five parts. The following outlines the information you should include in each of the five parts.

Part 1: Introduce the writer or speaker, the text, and the central claim.

Part 2: Explain how the author develops or advances the argument.

Part 3: State the author’s purpose in writing the text.

Part 4: Describe the intended audience and the author’s relationship to the audience.

Part 5: Explain the significance of the work.

Part 1: Introduce the writer or speaker, the text, and the central claim.

Sample¹⁹

In the essay “The Space-Taker Effect,” Jenny While, a senior at El Cajon Valley High School, *argues that* students who are unmotivated and misbehaved take away from the learning environment and cause teachers to slow down and lower expectations. According to While, these “space-takers take away valuable instructional time,” leaving little for those who want to learn.

Template:

In _____ , _____ , _____ ,
 (type of text) (title of text) (author's first and last name)

 (information about the author) (verb, e.g., claims, argues, asserts, etc.)

that _____
 (paraphrase or quote the central claim and include other essential sub-claims)

¹⁹ Jenny While’s “The Space-Takers Effect” was used to create the five samples for this activity.

Part 2: Explain how the author develops or advances the argument.

When completing this section of the précis, consider how the author has developed or supported his or her central claim. What does the writer or speaker do in each paragraph and in each section? For instance, authors will illustrate an idea, describe an event, share an anecdote, draw a comparison, or do some other work. The explanation for this section typically follows the sequence of ideas in the text.

Sample

She supports this claim by first describing the types of students who “take up space” in her school. *Then*, she makes a connection between her school’s poor performance on state and local exams and the “space-takers” who have done very little to prepare themselves for these high stakes tests. *Toward the end of the essay*, While challenges the effectiveness of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and outlines its limitations.

Template:

_____ this claim by first _____
(He/She) (supports/develops) (explain what the author is doing: verb)

Then, _____
(explain what the author does next)

(Use a prepositional phrase like “Toward the end of the text,” “In the section,” or some other phrase in order to add variety to your writing)



Part 3: State the author’s purpose in writing the text.

Sample

While’s *purpose is to* call attention to the flaws in educating all students—especially those who outwardly reject the opportunity—in *order to* prompt schools and districts to formulate practical solutions for low-performing students while taking care of those who want to learn.

Template:

_____ 's purpose is to _____
(author's last name)

in order to _____
(What does the author want the audience to do or feel as a result of this work?)

Part 4: Describe the intended audience and the author’s relationship to the audience.

Sample

She establishes a formal tone for educators, politicians, and other concerned parents who have children in high school. Although she is writing to an adult audience, her message extends to her peers—high school students.

Template:

_____ establishes _____ for _____
(He/She) (describe the tone of the author)

(What is the relationship between the author and his/her audience?)

Part 5: Explain the significance of this work.

Sample

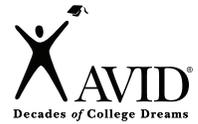
This work is significant because it challenges those in education to rethink classroom dynamics. Specifically, she addresses how the various skill levels and attitudes in one classroom can affect the quality of learning.

Template:

This work is significant because _____

The complete précis

In her essay “Don’t Take Valuable Space in My School,” Jenny While, a senior at El Cajon Valley High School, *argues that* students who are unmotivated and misbehaved take away from the learning environment and cause teachers to slow down and lower expectations. According to While, these “space-takers take away valuable instructional time,” leaving little for those who want to learn. *She supports this claim by first* describing the types of students who “take up space” in her school. *Then*, she makes a connection between her school’s poor performance on state and local exams and the “space-takers” who have done very little to prepare themselves for these high stakes tests. *Toward the end of the essay*, While challenges the effectiveness of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and outlines its limitations. *While’s purpose is to* call attention to the flaws in educating all students—especially those who outwardly reject the opportunity—in order to prompt schools and districts to formulate practical solutions for low-performing students while taking care of those who want to learn. *She establishes* a formal tone for educators, politicians, and other concerned parents who have children in high school. Although she is writing to an adult audience, her message extends to her peers—high school students. *This work is significant because* it challenges those in education to rethink classroom dynamics. Specifically, she addresses how the various skill levels and attitudes in one classroom can affect the quality of learning.



Rhetorical Précis: *Template*

In _____
(Include the following: author's first and last name, type of text, title of work)

_____ argues that _____
(author's last name)

He/ she claims that _____

_____ this claim by first _____
(He/She) (supports/develops) (Explain what the author is doing: verb)

Then _____

And finally, _____

_____ 's purpose is to _____
(author's last name)



in order to _____

_____ establishes _____
(He/She) (Describe the tone of the author: formal, sarcastic, critical, etc.)

for _____
(What is the relationship between the author and his/her audience?)

This work is significant because _____

List of Words to Describe an Author's Tone

This is a list of words that could be used while examining an author's tone. Students can use this list when completing the rhetorical précis or while doing similar work.

Tone	Meaning
apologetic	sorry
appreciative	grateful; thankful
concerned	worried or interested
critical	finding fault
curious	wanting to find out more
defensive	defending
direct	straightforward; honest
disappointed	discouraged; unhappy because something went wrong
encouraging	optimistic
enthusiastic	excited; energetic
formal	respectful, appropriate behavior
frustrated	angry because of not being able to do something
hopeful	looking forward to something; optimistic
humorous	funny
informal	not formal; relaxed
inspirational	encouraging; reassuring
ironic	different from what is expected or the opposite of what is meant
judgmental	judging others; critical
lighthearted	happy, carefree
mocking	scornful; ridiculing; making fun of someone
negative	unhappy; pessimistic
neutral	neither good nor bad; neither for nor against
nostalgic	thinking about the past; wishing for something from the past
objective	without prejudice; without discrimination; fair
optimistic	hopeful; cheerful
pessimistic	seeing the bad side of things
sarcastic	scornful; mocking; ridiculing
satirical	making fun of something to show its weakness or teach a lesson
sentimental	thinking about feelings, especially when remembering the past
sincere	honest; truthful; earnest
sympathetic	compassionate; understanding of how someone feels
urgent	insistent; saying something must be done soon