

Précis writing is one of the most useful skills you can acquire for your work both as a student and as a professional (the 'executive summary' of a report is an example of a précis).

Précis writing involves summarising a document to extract the maximum amount of information, then conveying this information to a reader in the minimum number of words. In reducing the number of words, it is usually necessary to paraphrase from the original document. Paraphrasing simply means the expressing of ideas from the original document in your own words. When you paraphrase, you should try to write as concisely as possible, cutting out all the unnecessary verbiage, but you must always be very careful not to lose or distort the original meaning. A successful précis is approximately one-third of the length of the original document.

Guidelines for Writing an Effective Précis

- **Identify the reader and purpose of the précis**—This determines how much detail should be included and how formal the précis needs to be. For instance, the précis you make of a textbook chapter for your own study purposes does not have to be as carefully refined as the executive summary of a formal report for an important client.
- **Read the original document**—Skim-read the document to get an overview, then read it again more slowly to identify the main themes and to distinguish the key ideas and concepts from the unimportant ones.
- **Underline the key ideas and concepts**—Each paragraph should have one key topic, which the rest of the paragraph clarifies, supports and develops.
- **Write a note-form summary of each paragraph**—Use the words of the original document, but omit all irrelevant material.
- **Write a précis**—Paraphrase to express the summarised points more concisely and to develop them into coherent sentences, expressing all important points in a generalised form. Eliminate any repetitions or irrelevant details.
- **Review and edit**—Compare your précis with original document and make sure that it emphasises the same points. Ensure that the précis is clear, concise and coherent.

Example of Précis Writing

Original document

Because the ability to communicate effectively plays an important part in an accountant's success on the job, many employers screen prospective accountants for adequate skills in oral and written communication. In fact, one study shows communication skills to be the most important factor in decisions to hire. Employers view the ability to write and speak effectively as even more important than a prospective employee's academic results.

(66 words)

Action: underline key words or ideas

Action: write note-form summary

- *ability to communicate effectively important to accountant's success*
- *important factor in decision to hire*
- *employers value communication skills even more than academic results*

Action: Use your own words to express these key ideas more concisely and to develop a full sentence paraphrase which conveys the original message accurately and is clear, concise and coherent.

Employers recognise the importance of oral and written communication in accounting, and therefore prefer to hire graduates with effective communication skills.

(21 words)

- Note that the words have been changed to express the key ideas more concisely. In changing the words in this way, always make sure the key ideas are not lost or distorted.
- Also note that the author of the précis did not argue or expand the original piece. This is not the purpose of a traditional précis, but you might consider adding some commentary after the précis.

Source: Curtin University of Technology; Study Skills Web Site
http://www.startup.curtin.edu.au/study_skills/precis.html