

8.2. PRECIS

The skills of comprehension and condensation (p113) need to be supplemented by another equally important skill, that of precis writing. In business and commerce there is great pressure for quick action and disposal of work. We need to sift through heaps of information and present it logically to arrive at a decision. For success in this kind of work we must develop the ability to put in brief, what has been written or said by another at length, without missing any significant point or emphasis. When we perform an exercise of this type, we summarize or make a precis of the material before us. No wonder, then, that so much importance is attached to precis writing in educational institutions and recruitment examinations.

8.2.1. What is a Precis?

The word 'precis' is derived from French which means 'exact' or 'terse'. It is pronounced 'pray-see'. There is no change in the spelling of its plural but it is pronounced 'pray-seez'. *A precis may be defined as a restatement in shortened form of the main ideas and points in a piece of writing.* There is no fixed rule about the length of a precis but ordinarily it should contain one-third of the number of words in the original passage. Precis is just not putting in different words what the original contains. It is neither a paraphrase of the original passage nor a list of its main points. It is a piece of continuous writing and so, in order to be effective, it should possess qualities such as proper organization of ideas, logical sequencing of points and the use of that variety of language which the situation demands. But at the same time a precis is not a creative writing, inasmuch as it is merely a condensed reproduction of the original writer's ideas, views, etc. It does not contain any comments, explanation or elaboration by the precis writer. It has no place for examples, illustrations and literary tropes used by the writer of the original to emphasize his point.

To make a good precis the first requirement is a clear understanding of the given passage, its basic content. Next we must have the ability to reproduce its main ideas effectively in our own language. Precis writing thus involves an exercise both in comprehension and effective writing. That is why the skill of precis writing is so highly valued.

8.2.2. Qualities of a Good Precis

- (i) Completeness: A precis should cover the essential contents of the given passage. It should not omit any important fact or idea.
- (ii) Clarity : It should express the meaning of the original passage clearly and be free from all ambiguities and redundancies. Without reading the original, one should be able to get the main ideas through the precis.
- (iii) Conciseness : A precis must be brief and precise. It should be a coherent piece of writing, presenting the argument logically. It must be accepted in a court of law.
- (iv) A precis must have a heading or title conveying the central idea of the given discourse.

8.2.3. Ten Steps of Precis Writing

The skill of comprehension is the first step towards precis writing. But to understand a passage and to answer a few questions based on it is one thing, but to re-express briefly the chief points contained in it is another. Practice is essential to acquire this skill. The following steps are followed in writing a good precis :

- (i) To understand what the passage is about, read it carefully. Put down the main theme in a sentence or phrase. Also think of a suitable title for it. This exercise helps in choosing what is important and omitting what is unimportant in the passage.
- (ii) Read through the passage again, and make sure that no hint or suggestion escapes you. This time underline the keywords, phrases, clauses and sentences.
- (iii) Select the essential points, jot them down, and reject the rest.
- (iv) Prepare your first draft on the basis of underlined key words, phrases, etc., and the essential points you have jotted down.
- (v) Compare your draft with the original to check for any omissions and irrelevancies.
- (vi) Check the length of the precis. If it is more than the required limit, go through the draft again and delete any unnecessary words or phrases or rewrite some sentences to cut it down to the suitable length.
- (vii) Read the revised draft once more, this time paying particular attention to punctuation, spelling, and grammar. Remember, it is just as important to write well in a precis as in any other composition.
- (viii) Prepare the final draft neatly.
- (ix) Write in brackets at the bottom of your precis in the right hand corner the number of words used by you.
- (x) Write 'Rough' on the top of your first draft and the list of points you have made and cross them out.

8.2.4. Do's for Precis Writing

- (i) Use your own language as far as possible.
- (ii) Keep the same sequence of events, ideas, arguments, etc., which you find in the original passage; change it only for the sake of achieving clarity.
- (iii) Drop figures of speech, examples and illustrations. In a passage entirely devoted to the illustration of some idea or argument, use the illustration in a compressed form.
- (iv) Give maximum information within the required limit.
- (v) Use indirect speech and the third person.

8.2.5. Dont's for Precis Writing

- (i) Avoid copying from the original.
- (ii) Do not divide your precis into paragraphs unless the original passage is very long.
- (iii) Do not change any facts.
- (iv) Do not make any comments on the form and content of the original passage.