Riverside City College
Name ___________________________________
Writing and Reading Center
Date ____________________________________
Directed Learning Activity C.15

**RHETORICAL PRÉCIS**

**Purpose:** Upon completion of this activity, students will first **consider** the précis through the precise description of each sentence's content, then **comprehend** the précis through the included example, and lastly students will **construct** a précis of their own. If at any time you have questions, please visit with an instructor. This DLA is adapted from the Southwestern College English 115 Curriculum Resource Manual.

A rhetorical précis differs from a summary in that it is a less neutral, more analytical condensation of both the content and method of the original text. If you think of a summary as primarily a brief representation of what a text says, then you might think of the rhetorical précis as a brief representation of what a text both says and does. Although less common than a summary, a rhetorical précis is a particularly useful way to sum up your understanding of how a text works rhetorically (*Reading Rhetorically* 62).

**THE STRUCTURE OF A RHETORICAL PRÉCIS**

**Sentence One:** Name of author (and a brief fact to establish credibility), type and title of work, date in parentheses; a rhetorically active verb, and a **THAT** clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) in the text.

**Sentence Two:** An explanation of **how** the author develops and supports the thesis. What mode(s) and kinds of evidence does the author use? (Your explanation is usually presented in the same chronological order that the items of support are presented in the work.) Avoid merely summarizing what the author says.

**Sentence Three:** A statement of the author’s apparent purpose, followed by an “in order to” or “so that” phrase in which you explain what the author wants the audience to do or feel as a result of reading (or hearing) the work.

**Sentence Four:** A description of the author’s tone and the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

**THE FINISHED PRODUCT**

In her article “Who Cares if Johnny Can’t Read?” (1997) Larissa MacFarquhar, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, asserts **that** Americans are reading more than ever despite claims to the contrary and that it is time to reconsider why we value reading so much, especially certain kinds of “high culture” reading. (2) MacFarquhar supports her claims about American reading habits with facts and statistics that compare past and present reading practices, and she challenges common assumptions **by** raising questions about reading’s intrinsic value. (3) Her **purpose** is to dispel certain myths about reading in
order to raise new and more important questions about the value of reading and other media in our culture. (4) She seems to have a young, hip, somewhat irreverent audience in mind because her tone is sarcastic, and she suggests that the ideas she opposes are old-fashioned positions.

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RHETORICAL PRÉCIS SENTENCE STARTERS

**Sentence One (Who/What?)** ____________________________, ____________________________, (author’s full name) (credibility)
in the ____________________________, ______________________________________________, (A) (title)
__________________________________________________________ that ________________________________ (B)

__________________________________________________________.

**Sentence Two (How?)** __________________________ supports his/her ____________________________ (author’s last name) (B)
by (see C) ___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________.

**Sentence Three (Why?)** The author’s purpose is to ____________________________ (D)
in order to / so that ____________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________.

**Sentence Four (To Whom?)** The author writes in/uses a (an) __________________________ tone for (E)
____________________________________________________________________________________
(audience)
**Word Bank – some possibilities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>article</td>
<td>analyzes, analysis, argues, argument,</td>
<td><strong>Modes:</strong> comparing, contrasting, telling, explaining,</td>
<td>challenge</td>
<td>angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blog</td>
<td>asserts, assertion, claims, defines,</td>
<td>illustrating, demonstrating, defining, describing, listing</td>
<td>clarify</td>
<td>blunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>book</td>
<td>definition, explains, explanation,</td>
<td><strong>Types of Evidence:</strong> analogy, hypothetical situations, factual</td>
<td>convince</td>
<td>casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>book review</td>
<td>interprets, interpretation, questions,</td>
<td>examples, expert testimony, statistics, personal/anecdotal</td>
<td>deconstruct</td>
<td>discouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>column</td>
<td>suggests, suggestion, theorizes, theory</td>
<td>experience</td>
<td>extend</td>
<td>formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>essay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>illustrate</td>
<td>humorous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>editorial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>inform</td>
<td>neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>persuade</td>
<td>provocative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>point out</td>
<td>sarcastic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adapted by Sarah L. Martin from an earlier version created by Micah Jendian.

**I know what it says…but what does it do?**

*The following verbs will be helpful when analyzing what an author is doing (the rhetorical moves he/she is making), rather than what he/she is saying.

Acknowledges | Differentiates | Justifies
Amplifies | Discusses | Models
Analyzes | Dissects | Navigates
Argues | Distinguishes | Organizes
Articulates | Establishes | Outlines
Asserts | Evaluates | Persuades
Blends | Exemplifies | Predicts
Challenges | Explains | Presents
Clarifies | Forecasts | Proposes
Compares | Gathers | Proves
Compiles | Generalizes | Qualifies
Concludes | Identifies | Questions
Constructs | Illustrates | Substantiates
Contrasts | Incorporates | Suggests
Debates | Inspects | Summarizes
Deconstructs | Integrates | Theorizes
Defends | Interprets | Traces
Defines | Introduces | Uses
**An Author’s Tone**

*Here are some examples of the kinds of tone an author can take and the different ways that readers can interpret them. Note that by using the negative connotation as opposed to the neutral connotation, a reader can get across his/her opinions of the author in a rhetorically subtle way.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone</th>
<th>Neutral Connotation</th>
<th>Negative Connotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>Irritated, vexed, indignant</td>
<td>Worked up, offended, furious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biased</td>
<td>One-sided, partial</td>
<td>Warped, twisted, myopic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt</td>
<td>Frank, candid, direct, plain-spoken</td>
<td>Brutal, cruel, tactless, caustic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Informal, easy-going</td>
<td>Slick, careless, unprofessional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Provocative, defiant, questioning</td>
<td>Argumentative, insulting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humorous</td>
<td>Amusing, funny, jovial, joking</td>
<td>Absurd, ridiculous, ludicrous, silly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Intelligent, knowledgeable</td>
<td>Egghead, pedantic, know-it-all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Impartial, unbiased, open-minded, objective</td>
<td>Disengaged, unengaged, amoral, apathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personable</td>
<td>Friendly, good-natured, affable</td>
<td>Chummy, overly-familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Dispirited, discouraged, unhappy</td>
<td>Pitiful, pathetic, bitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcastic</td>
<td>Satirical, disparaging, scornful, contemptuous</td>
<td>Insulting, offensive, ill-tempered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughtful \ vs. Thoughtless</td>
<td>Profound, careful, well-reasoned</td>
<td>Imprudent, rash, tactless</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who Cares If Johnny Can’t Read? The Value of Books is Overstated.
By Larissa MacFarquhar

Posted Thursday, April 17, 1997 in Slate, Microsoft’s online magazine about politics and culture.

Among the truisms that make up the eschatology of American cultural decline, one of the most banal is the assumption that Americans don’t read. Once, the story goes—in the 1950s, say—we read much more than we do now, and read the good stuff, the classics. Now, we don’t care about reading anymore, we’re barely literate, and television and computers are rendering books obsolete.

None of this is true. We read much more now than we did in the ’50s. In 1957, 17 percent of people surveyed in a Gallup poll said they were currently reading a book; in 1990, over twice as many did. In 1953, 40 percent of people polled by Gallup could name the author of Huckleberry Finn; in 1990, 51 percent could. In 1950, 8,600 new titles were published; in 1981, almost five times as many.

In fact, Americans are buying more books now than ever before—over 2 billion in 1992. Between the early ’70s and the early ’80s, the number of bookstores in this country nearly doubled—and that was before the Barnes & Noble superstore and Amazon.com. People aren’t just buying books as status objects, either. A 1992 survey found that the average adult American reads 11.2 books per year, which means that the country as a whole reads about 2 billion—the number bought. There are more than 250,000 reading groups in the country at the moment, which means that something like 2 million people regularly read books and meet to discuss them.

In his book about Jewish immigrants in America at the turn of the century, World of Our Fathers, Irving Howe describes a time that sounds impossibly antiquated, when minimally educated laborers extended their workdays to attend lectures and language classes. Howe quotes an immigrant worker remembering his adolescence in Russia: “How can I describe to you … the excitement we shared when we would discuss Dostoyevsky? … Here in America young people can choose from movies and music and art and dancing and God alone knows what. But we—all we had was books, and not so many of them, either.”

Hearing so much about the philistinism of Americans, we think such sentiments fossils of a bygone age. But they’re not. People still write like that about books. Of course, most aren’t reading Dostoyevsky. The authors who attract thousands and thousands of readers who read everything they write and send letters to them begging for more seem to be the authors of genre fiction—romances, science fiction, and mysteries.

Romance readers are especially devoted. The average romance reader spends $1,200 a year on books, and often comes to think of her favorite authors as close friends. Romance writer Debbie Macomber, for instance, gets thousands of letters a year, and when her daughter had a baby, readers sent her a baby blanket and a homemade Christmas stocking with the baby’s name embroidered on it. It’s writers like Macomber who account for the book boom. In 1994, a full 50 percent of books purchased fell into the category of “popular fiction.” (Business and self-help books were the next biggest group at 12 percent, followed by “cooking/crafts” at 11 percent, “religion” at 7 percent, and “art/literature/poetry” at 5 percent.)

These reading habits are not new. Genre fiction and self-help books have constituted the bulk of the American book market for at least 200 years. A survey conducted in 1930 found that the No. 1 topic people wanted to read about was personal hygiene. And you just have to glance through a list of best sellers through the ages to realize how little we’ve changed: Daily Strength for Daily Needs (1985); Think and Grow Rich (1937); Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships (1964); Harlow: An Intimate Biography (1964).

Romance writers tend to be clear-eyed about what it is they’re doing. They don’t think they’re creating subversive feminine versions of Proust. They’re producing mass-market entertainment that appeals to its consumers for much the same reason as McDonald’s and Burger King appeal to theirs: It’s easy, it makes you feel good, and it’s the same every time. The point of a romance novel is not to dazzle its reader with originality, but to stimulate predictable emotions by means of familiar cultural symbols. As romance writer Kathleen Gilles Seidel puts it: “My reader comes to my book when she is tired. … Reading may be the only
way she knows how to relax. If I am able to give her a few delicious, relaxing hours, that is a noble enough purpose for me.”

But then, if romance novels are just another way to relax, what, if anything, makes them different from movies or beer? Why should the activity “reading romances” be grouped together with “reading philosophy” rather than with “going for a massage”? The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress spends lots of time and money coming up with slogans like “Books Make a Difference.” But is the mere fact of reading something—anything—a cultural achievement worth celebrating?

We haven’t always thought so. When the novel first became popular in America in the latter half of the 18th century, it was denounced as a sapper of brain cells and a threat to high culture in much the same way that television is denounced today. In the 1940s, Edmund Wilson declared that “detective stories [are] simply a kind of vice that, for silliness and minor harmfulness, ranks somewhere between smoking and crossword puzzles.” You almost never hear this kind of talk anymore in discussions of American reading habits: Not all reading is worth doing. Some books are just a waste of time.

As fears of cultural apocalypse have been transferred away from novels onto a series of high-tech successors (radio, movies, television, and now computers), books have acquired a reputation for educational and even moral worthiness. Books are special: You can send them through the mail for lower rates, and there are no customs duties imposed on books imported into this country. There have, of course, been endless culture wars fought over what kind of books should be read in school, but in discussions of adult reading habits these distinctions tend to evaporate.

The sentimentalization of books gets especially ripe when reading is compared with its supposed rivals: television and cyberspace. Valorization of reading over television, for instance, is often based on the vague and groundless notion that reading is somehow “active” and television “passive.” Why it is that the imaginative work done by a reader is more strenuous or worthwhile than that done by a viewer—or why watching television is more passive then, say, watching a play—is never explained. Sven Birkerts’ maudlin 1994 paean to books, The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age, is a classic example of this genre. Time art critic Robert Hughes made a similarly sentimental and mysterious argument recently in the New York Review of Books:

Reading is a collaborative act, in which your imagination goes halfway to meet the author’s; you visualize the book as you read it, you participate in making up the characters and rounding them out. … The effort of bringing something vivid out of the neutral array of black print is quite different, and in my experience far better for the imagination, than passive submission to the bright icons of television, which come complete and overwhelming, and tend to burn out the tender wiring of a child’s imagination because they allow no re-working.

I cannot remember ever visualizing a book’s characters, but everyone who writes about reading seems to do this, so perhaps I’m in the minority. Still, you could equally well say that you participate in making up TV characters because you have to imagine what they’re thinking, where in a novel, you’re often provided with this information.

Another reason why books are supposed to be better than television is that books are quirky and individualistic and real, whereas television is mass-produced corporate schlock. But of course popular books can be, and usually are, every bit as formulaic and “corporatized” as television. The best books might be better then the best television, but further down the pile the difference gets murkier. Most of the time the choice between books and television is not between Virgil and Geraldo but between The Celestine Prophecy and Roseanne. Who wouldn’t pick Roseanne?

If the fertility of our culture is what we’re concerned about, then McLuhanesque musing on the intrinsic nature of reading (as if it had any such thing) is beside the point. Reading per se is not the issue. The point is to figure out why certain kinds of reading and certain kinds of television might matter in the first place.