

A rhetorical precis analyzes both the content (the *what*) and delivery (the *how*) of a unit of spoken or written discourse. It is a highly structured four-sentence paragraph blending summary and analysis. Each of the four sentences requires specific information; students are expected to use brief quotations (to convey a sense of the author's style and tone) and to include a terminal bibliographic reference (a citation). Practicing this sort of writing fosters precision in both reading and writing, forcing a writer to employ a variety of sentence structures and to develop a discerning eye for connotative shades of meaning.

Precis Format

OVERALL FORMAT:

Sentence 1: Name of author, [optional: a phrase describing author], genre and title of work (publication date in parentheses) (additional publishing information in parentheses or note); a rhetorically accurate verb (such as “assert,” “argue,” “suggest,” “imply,” “claim,” etc.); and a THAT clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) of the work.

Sentence 2: An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis, usually in chronological order.

Sentence 3: A statement of the author's purpose followed by an “in order to” phrase and explanation.

Sentence 4: A description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

Now take a closer look:

1. **THE FIRST SENTENCE identifies** the essay's *author and title*, **provides** the article's *date* in parenthesis, **uses** some form of the verb says (*claims, asserts, suggests, argues* –) followed by that and the *essay's thesis* (paraphrased or quoted).

EXAMPLE: In “The Ugly Truth about Beauty” (1998), Dave Barry argues that “...women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do” (4).

2. **THE SECOND SENTENCE conveys** the *author's support* for the thesis (the way in which the author develops the essay); the trick is to convey a good sense of the breadth of the author's support/examples, usually in chronological order.

EXAMPLE: Barry illuminates this discrepancy by juxtaposing men's perceptions of their looks (“average-looking”) with women's (“not good enough”), by contrasting female role models (Barbie, Cindy Crawford) with male role models (He-Man, Buzz-Off), and by comparing men's interests (the Super Bowl, lawn care) with women's (manicures).

3. **THE THIRD SENTENCE analyzes** the *author's purpose* using an in order to statement.

EXAMPLE: He exaggerates and stereotypes these differences in order to prevent women from so eagerly accepting society's expectation of them; to this end, Barry claims that men who want women to “look like

Cindy Crawford” are “idiots” (10), implying that women who adhere to the Crawford standard are fools as well.

4. **THE FOURTH SENTENCE** describes the essay’s *target audience* and **characterizes** the author’s relationship with that audience—or the essay’s *tone*.

EXAMPLE: Barry ostensibly addresses men in this essay because he opens and closes the essay directly addressing men (as in “If you’re a man...”) and by offering to give them advice in a mockingly conspiratorial fashion; however, by using humor to poke fun at both men and women’s perceptions of themselves, Barry makes his essay palatable to women as well, hoping to convince them to stop obsessively “thinking they need to look like Barbie” (8).

Put it all together and it looks pretty darn smart:

In “The Ugly Truth about Beauty” (1998), Dave Barry argues that “...women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do” (4). Barry illuminates this discrepancy by juxtaposing men’s perceptions of their looks (“average-looking”) with women’s (“not good enough”), by contrasting female role models (Barbie, Cindy Crawford) with male role models (He-Man, Buzz-Off), and by comparing men’s interests (the Super Bowl, lawn care) with women’s (manicures). He exaggerates and stereotypes these differences in order to prevent women from so eagerly accepting society’s expectation of them; to this end, Barry claims that men who want women to “look like Cindy Crawford” are “idiots” (10), implying that women who adhere to the Crawford standard are fools as well. Barry ostensibly addresses men in this essay because he opens and closes the essay directly addressing men (as in “If you’re a man...”) and by offering to give them advice in a mockingly conspiratorial fashion; however, by using humor to poke fun at both men and women’s perceptions of themselves, Barry makes his essay palatable to women as well, hoping to convince them to stop obsessively “thinking they need to look like Barbie” (8).

Barry, Dave. “The Ugly Truth about Beauty.” *Mirror on America: Short Essays and*

Images from Popular Culture. 2nd ed. Eds. Joan T. Mims and Elizabeth N. Nollen.

NY: Bedford, 2003. 109-12.

Verb Bank

Here is a list of verbs you might find helpful. It is by no means a required or exhaustive list. Remember that you must always strive to employ the most connotatively precise words you can.

adjures advances advises asks asserts begs beseeches cajoles cheers chimes commands complains confides conveys counsels crows declares decrees decries demands describes dictates directs discloses divulges elucidates employs encourages entreats espouses exclaims exhorts explains gripes groans grouses grumbles hails hints illustrates implies implores inquires insinuates instructs intimates invokes justifies laments mandates mocks muses orders pleads ponders pontificates proclaims pronounces proposes queries rationalizes recommends recounts relates reports requests reveals sighs sings snarls sneers states submits suggests summons wails whimpers whines wields wonders

Adapted with gratitude from Tracy Duckart’s Instructional Website at Humboldt State University and Valerie Stevenson