UNIT 15 : PRÉCIS-WRITING

UNIT STRUCTURE

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- receive an idea on précis writing
- learn the skills required for good précis writing
- practice a few exercises on your own

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the concept of précis writing and the method of writing a précis. You may perhaps be familiar with what a précis is. Précis is a French word meaning a summary of a passage, written in an intelligible form. It should express the idea of the passage as concisely as possible without losing its meaning.

In this unit, you will get an idea about what précis writing is. You will also get a detailed explanation of the procedure involved in writing a précis. There will also be examples worked out for your benefit.

15.3 PRÉCIS WRITING

Let us look at a definition of précis given by Lydall– *"A précis is a* ***succinct*** *digest of the essential facts contained in any piece ofprinted, written,*

or spoken matter." As mentioned earlier, a précis is a summary, and précis writing is the process of summarising. By summary we mean the gist or the main theme of the passage in question, expressed in as few words as possible. It should be precise, coherent and should include all the essential points so that a reader is able to grasp the main thought without any difficulty, and without referring to the original. In a summary, the matter is reproduced in a reduced form; in a précis, however, the facts should be arranged concisely in a logical manner. Another point to be kept in mind is that a précis should always have a heading. This will help the reader to understand at a glance the subject of the narrative.

You should, however, not confuse précis writing with paraphrasing. A paraphrase reproduces the entire details of the passage along with the substance. It will, therefore, be as long as or even longer than the original. But a précis is always shorter than the original, reproducing only the main points and that too as briefly as possible. As different writers write differently, no fixed rule can be laid down regarding the length of a précis. But it is generally held that a précis should not contain more than a third of the number of words in the original passage.

Passages can be of three kinds, namely, **descriptive**, which gives a description of places, things etc.; **narrative**, which narrates events or stories; and **reflective**, which contains reflections on abstract things.

Let us now see how précis writing can help us improve our reading and writing skills.

Précis writing is a very good exercise in reading. Most people do not pay attention while reading and therefore retain only a vague idea of what they have read. You can yourself understand this by conducting a simple exercise. Read a passage in your usual way; and then try to put into writing the substance of what you have read. You will find that you have difficulty in penning your thoughts.

This is not because your memory is weak. It is because your attention was not centered fully on the passage. Therefore, you could not grasp it as you read it. Here précis writing helps you in the sense that it forces your attention on the passage. Otherwise you will not be able to write the summary

unless you have grasped its meaning. So don't you think that précis writing is an excellent means of improving the concentration power of an individual? It teaches one to read with both the mind as well the eye, engaged on the passage in question.

In a similar manner, précis writing is also a good exercise in writing a composition. It teaches one to organise one's thought and express it clearly, succinctly and effectively. You may have seen an illiterate man narrating a story. He is not always apt, brings in irrelevant matter and leaves out the important details, bringing them in as an afterthought sometimes. He also takes a lot of time to say what could well be expressed in a few words. In a précis, you have to express your thoughts in a certain number of words. Hence, you have to choose your words carefully, construct your sentences in a way as to make them full and brief at the same time, and also put the matter in a coherent and logical manner.

So we see that précis writing is of great value in our daily life. It helps us to grasp, what we hear and read, quickly and accurately, and reproduce it clearly and precisely. Let us now have a look at the procedure of writing a précis.

15.4 WRITING A PRÉCIS

Let us have a look at how to write a good précis. It will help you if you keep in mind the following points:

- In order to write a good précis, the first thing you need to keep in mind is to *read the passage in question carefully*. If you are not able to comprehend the passage in your first reading, you read it several times so as to grasp the subject matter of the passage. You can try and question yourself in order to make yourself more clear about the main theme of the passage. Also, you can mark on the passage the point at which you will start the précis and the point where you will end it.
- The next thing you need to do is note down the main points of the passage. *The notes should be very brief*. You should be able to decide which parts are essential and which parts are not important and hence

can be omitted. It is useful to pay special attention to the principal clauses of complex sentences.

- After this, try to express in your own words what is said on each of the main points. You may rearrange the ideas in your own way, but care should be taken so that *your final copydoes not seem to be series of disjointed sentences*. You need to keep in mind that a précis is a summary of the original. Hence it should not contain any extra information or any colloquialism, rhetorical expressions etc. Also there should not be any phrases or sentences quoted from the original. **Your précis should be self contained** so that it is able to convey its message clearly without referring to the original.
- After making a rough daft of the précis and counting the number of words you have used, make a fair copy of the précis in a single paragraph. You can also state the number of words you have used in the end. It is necessary to keep in mind that *your précis reads as a continuous paragraph*.
- A précis is usually written in the indirect speech as a rule. But care should be taken regarding the change in the grammar. It is necessary to avoid exclamations, interrogations etc. It is also necessary to use the pronouns *he*, *she*, *they* carefully. Some passages are however best summarised in the direct speech. You should avoid being repetitive and also omit illustrations and examples which are not necessary.
- The précis needs to be in simple, correct grammatical English without the use of difficult words and sentences. For example, we may look at the following sentences which can be written in simple English :

John behaved in a manner which made him liable to prosecution: John behaved illegally.

Jack fell into the river and before anyone could help him, he sank to its depths: Jack drowned in the river.

His courage in battle might without exaggeration be called lion-like: He was very brave in battle.

- Passages which contain advice should be written in the first or third person even if the passage itself is in the second person. Example– Obey your elders: We must (or should) obey our elders.
- If the original passage is in the first person, then the précis should be in the third person, either giving the name of the author wherever it is available or using terms such as the author, the speaker, the narrator etc. For example– "I wandered lonely as a cloud.": The poet was wandering about alone.
- You should keep in mind the length of the précis while writing it. A few words more or less however do not matter. The first draft may be a little longer. In fact, it is only after several drafts that you will succeed in writing a coherent, logical précis. If the passage contains very condensed matter, the précis may be longer. It is generally seen that poetry pieces tend to have a longer précis than prose pieces. You will find that a good deal of patience and revision is required before you get your précis right! The finished product, as mentioned earlier, must be a piece of good, clear, simple English prose.
- Finally, you may give a suitable title to your précis which sums up the subject matter. Sometimes, you may find the title in one of the key sentences in the passage. Otherwise, you may use a phrase, a word, or a short sentence which briefs up the main thought of the passage. You will be more clear if you go through the examples worked out later in this unit.



15.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that a précis is a summary of a given passage written in clear, simple English in a logical manner. You have learnt how a précis can improve your reading and writing skills. You have also learnt the numerous aspects that you need to keep in mind while

writing a précis. The following worked out examples will help you further in your understanding of how to write a précis.



15.6 FURTHER READING

1) Aggarwala, N. K. (2001). *Essentials of English Grammar and Composition*. New Delhi: Goyal Brothers.

2) De Sarkar, P. K. (2007). *Higher English Grammar and Composition*. Kolkata: Book Syndicate Limited.

3) Wren and Martin (1996). *High School English Grammar and Composition*. New Delhi: S. Chand & Company.

15.7 EXAMPLES

Let us look at a step by step method of writing a précis:

First, let us read the following passage:

"We reached a point where the path crossed a motor road under construction, and we could see that it ran through a cutting made in the side of a steep hill. Men were working in the cutting, and there were more men far up the hillside above it. The bed of the cutting was full of huge boulders, which were to form the foundation of the road.

Over these boulders we picked our way with difficulty, jumping from one to the other like so many goats. In the middle of them I stopped to take a photograph, while the others went on ahead. Suddenly I heard shouts, followed by a dull sound of an explosion from the hillside above me. Looking up, I found I was now alone in the cutting. The smoke of a blasting charge floated out against the blue sky, and an enormous rock was bounding savagely down the hill.

I had no doubt where it was going to land. It was going to land on me. This opinion was clearly shared by the men who had released the boulder, as they were gesticulating wildly two hundred yards above me. I made a prodigious leap from my rock to the next. The galloping boulder bumped against the hillside, kicked up a cloud of dust, and slightly changed direction. It was still coming straight for me. There was nothing to be done but to take cover if I could find any; otherwise the prospect before me was one of almost certain death. I glanced hastily around. Just as I was resigning myself to inevitable disaster, I noticed a narrow opening between two rocks quite near me. I reached this in time, wedged myself in and shut my eyes. With a tremendous thud the mass of rock struck the ground and came to rest a few feet away from me. It hardly splintered at all, and none of the splinters came my way. It was indeed a miraculous escape."

Now that we have read the passage, let us make a note of the main points in the passage:

1. Explosion-smoke-sky.
2. Rock bounded savagely.
3. Men above gesticulated.
4. Writer jumped-next rock.
5. Boulder hit hillside-dust.
6. Came towards him.
7. Glanced round.
8. Noticed opening– 2 rocks.
9. Wedged himself in.
10. Rock struck ground, thud.
11. Stopped near him.

Having made a note of the main points, let us now make a rough draft of the précis :

''After the explosion, the writer saw smoke drifting across the sky and a big rock rolling wildly down the hill. The men above waved to him to warn him of the danger and the writer jumped on to the next rock. Then the boulder struck the side of the hill and raised a cloud of dust. It then came towards the writer, who quickly looked around for cover. He noticed a gap between

two rocks and wedged himself between them. The boulder struck the ground with a thud and stopped quite near him."

(92 words)

Finally, let us write the fair copy of the précis :

"After the explosion, smoke appeared in the sky and a great boulder came rolling wildly downhill. Above, the workmen waved to the writer warning him of the danger and he jumped on to a nearby rock. After striking the hillside and raising a cloud of dust, the boulder moved towards the man. Quickly glancing round for shelter, he noticed a gap between two rocks and wedged himself in it as the boulder thudded against the ground and then stopped still."

(80 words)

Here are some more examples which will give you a fair idea as to how to write a précis :

"Once a little mouse, while playing, ran across a sleeping lion's face. The lion awoke in anger and caught the mouse in his paw. The mouse begged for pardon. It said, 'I am very sorry. Please pardon and spare my life. One day perhaps I may help you.' The lion laughed, but pardoned the mouse. So the mouse thanked him and ran away in joy. One day after this the lion was caught in a net by some hunters. He roared loudly in rage. The mouse heard the roar and went to the lion. The lion was strong; but could not break the net. The mouse first cut one rope and then another, and soon the lion was free."

Précis

Title : The lion and the mouse

Once a mouse disturbed a lion in his sleep. The lion caught the mouse and was going to kill it; but it begged for pardon and was let go. Shortly after the lion was caught in a strong net. Hearing his roar, the mouse came there and cut the ropes with its teeth. The lion became free.

[De Sarkar : 2007, 591]

1. The family, like the house in which we live, needs to be kept in repair, lest some little rift in the walls should appear and let in the wind and rain.

The happiness of a family depends very much on attention to little things. Order, pleasant comfort, regularity, cheerfulness, good taste, these are the ornaments of life, deprived of which it degenerates into a wearisome routine. There must be brightness and cheerful smiles in the dwelling. Home is not usually the place of toil, but the place to which we return, and rest from our labours; in which parents and children meet together and pass a careless and joyful hour. To have nothing to say to others at such times, in any rank of life, is a very unfortunate temper of mind, and may perhaps be regarded as a serious fault; at any rate, it makes the house vacant and joyless.

Précis

Title : How to make you home lively

Home is the place for peace and rest at the end of the day's labour. But the happiness of a house depends upon little things such as order, regularity, cheerfulness and pleasant conversation. Without these, the home becomes dull and cheerless. So, it will be unfortunate if a man has no pleasant word to say to others. It may ultimately spoil the happiness of the whole family.

[De Sarkar : 2007, 595]

2. Speech is a great blessing, but it can also be a great curse, for while it helps us to make our intentions clear and desires known to our fellows, it can also, if we use it carelessly, make our attitude completely misunderstood. A slip of the tongue, the use of an unusual word or of an ambiguous word, and so on, may create an enemy where we had hoped to win a friend. Again different classes of people use different vocabularies, and the ordinary speech of an educated man strike an uneducated listener as showing pride. Unwittingly we may use a word which bears a different meaning to our listener from what is done to men of our class. Thus speech is not a gift to use lightly without thought, but one which demands careful handling. Only a fool will express himself alike to all kinds and conditions of men.

Précis

Title : Speech– a Great Blessing

Speech is a valuable gift, but, if we are to make ourselves understood, we must use it carefully, since we may distort our meaning not only by the

careless use of words but by ignoring the fact that words do not always mean the same thing to different people.

(Aggarwala: 2001, 324)

15.8 EXERCISES

Try to write the précis of the following passages:

1. A great part of Arabia is desert. Here there is nothing but sand and rock. The sand is so hot that you cannot walk over it with your bare feet in the day time. Here and there in the desert are springs of water that come deep down under the ground- so deep that the sun cannot dry them up. These springs are few and far apart, but wherever there is one, trees grow tall and graceful, making a cool, green, shady place around the spring. Such a place is called an oasis.

The Arabs who are not in the cities live in the desert all the year round. They in tents that can be put up and taken down very easily and quickly so that they can move from one oasis to another, seeking grass and water for their sheep, goats, camels and horses. These desert Arabs eat ripe, sweet figs, and also the dates that grow upon the palm trees; they dry them too, and use them as food all the year round.

These Arabs have the finest horses in the world. An Arab is very proud of his riding horse, and loves him almost as he loves his wife and children. He never puts heavy loads upon his horse, and often lets him stay in the tent with his family.

The camel is much more useful to the Arab than his beautiful horse, however, for he is much larger and stronger. One camel can carry as much as or more than two horses. The Arab loads the camel with goods and rides him, too, for miles and miles across the desert- just as if he were really the “Ship of the Desert”, which he is often called.

2. A poor woman once came to Buddha to ask him whether he could give her any medicine to restore her dead child to life. The holy man told her that there was only one medicine to bring her son back to life. He bade her bring

him a handful of mustard seeds from a house where death had never entered. The sorrowing mother went from door to door seeking the mustard seeds, but at every door he met with sad replies. One said, "I have lost my husband." Another said, "Our child died last year." She returned to the teacher and told him the result of her quest. Then Buddha told her tenderly not to think much of her own grief, since sorrow and death are common to all.

3. Each one of us must realise that the only future for India and her people is one of tolerance and co-operation which has been the basis of our culture from ages past. We have laid down in our Constitution that India is a secular state. This does not mean irreligion. It means equal respect for all faiths and equal opportunities for those who profess any faith.

We have, therefore, always to keep in mind this vital aspect of our culture which is also of the highest importance in the India of today. Those who put up barriers between one Indian and another, and who promote disruptive tendencies do not serve the cause of India or her culture. They weaken us at home and discredit us abroad.

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