A precis is a summary, and precis-writing means summarising. Precis-writing is an exercise in compression. A precis is the gist or main theme of a passage expressed in as few words as possible. It should be lucid, succinct and full (i.e. including all essential points), so that anyone on reading it may be able to grasp the main points and general effect of the passage summarised.

A precis must always be much shorter than the original; for it is meant to express only the main theme, shorn of all unimportant details, and that as tersely as possible. As the style of writers differ, some being concise and some diffuse, no rigid rule can be laid down for the length of a precis; but so much may be said, that a precis should not contain more than a third of the number of words in the original passage.

I. Uses:
1. A precis-writing is a very fine exercise in reading. Most people read carefully, and retain only a vague idea of what they have read. You can easily test the value of your reading. Read in your usual way a chapter, or even a page, of a book; and then having closed the book try to put down briefly the substance of what you have just read. You will probably find that your memory of it is hazy and muddled. Is this because your memory is weak? No: it is because your attention was not fully centred on the passage while you were reading it. The memory cannot retain what was never given it to hold; you did not remember the passage properly because you did not properly grasp it as you read it. Now precis-writing forces you to pay attention to what you read; for no one can write a summary of any passage unless he has clearly grasped its meaning. So summarising is an excellent training in concentration of attention. It teaches one to read with the mind, as well as with the eye, on the page.

2. Precis-writing is also a very good exercise in writing a composition. It teaches one how to express one’s thoughts clearly, concisely and effectively. It is a splendid corrective of the common tendency to vague and disorderly thinking and loose and diffuse writing. Have you noticed how an uneducated person tells a story? He repeats himself, brings in a lot of irrelevant matter, omits from its proper place what is essential and drags it in later as an after-thought, and takes twenty minutes to say what a trained thinker would express in five. The whole effect is muddled and tedious. In a precis you have to work within strict
limits. You must express a certain meaning in a fixed number of words. So you learn to choose your words carefully, to construct your sentences with an eye to fullness combined with brevity, and to put your matter in a strictly logical order.

3. So practice in precis-writing is of great value for practical life. In any position of life the ability to grasp quickly and accurately what is read, or heard, and to reproduce it clearly and concisely, is of the utmost value. For lawyers, businessmen, and government officials it is essential.

II. Method of Procedure
You must make up your mind from the beginning that precis-writing means intensive brain-work. There is no easy short cut to summarising a passage. To tear the heart out of a passage means concentrated thought and you must be prepared for close attention and hard thinking.

1. Reading: (a) First read the passage through carefully, but not too slowly, to get a general idea of its meaning. If one reading is not sufficient to give you this clearly, read it over again, and yet again. The more you read it, the more familiar will it become to you, and the clearer will be (i) its subject, and (ii) what is said about that subject. Ask yourself, “What is it I am reading? What does the author mean? What is his subject? What is he saying about it? Can I put in a few words the pith of what he says?”

(b) Usually you are required to supply a title for your precis. This is a good stage at which to do this. Think of some word, phrase or short sentence that will sum up briefly the main subject of the passage. Sometimes this is supplied by what we may call a key-sentence. This key sentence may be found at the beginning or at the end of the passage. For example, “Hospitality is a virtue for which the natives of the East in general are highly and deservedly admired”. This at once suggests the short title of “Eastern Hospitality”. But you will not always find such convenient key-sentences in the passage you have to summarise. In their absence, you must get a clear idea of the subject from the passage as a whole, and then sum it up in a suitable heading.

The effort to find a suitable title at this stage will help you to define in your mind what exactly the subject, or main theme, of the passage is.

c) Further reading is now necessary to ensure that you understand the details of the passage as well as its main purport. Take it now sentence by sentence,
and word by word. If the meanings of any words are not clear, look them up in a dictionary. Detailed study of this kind is necessary, because a phrase, a sentence, or even a single word, may be of prime importance, and the misunderstanding of it may cause you to miss the whole point of the passage.

(d) You should now be in a position to decide what parts of the passage are essential and what parts are comparatively unimportant and so can be omitted without any loss. This process of selection is not so easy as some people think. Beginners select; but they often select in a haphazard or mechanical way. It requires some practice to be able to say, “This is essential to the meaning of the passage, and that is only incidental and unimportant.” The best guide, of course, is the subject or main theme, of the passage. If you have a clear and correct idea of that you will soon see what is important and what is unimportant.

At this stage it is useful to jot down your conclusions in brief notes – writing down the subject, the title, and the details which you consider essential or important. (This is a better plan than underlining sentences and phrases in the original).

2. **Writing:** (a) *Rough Drafts* – You should now be ready to attempt the writing of the precis; but be sure of the limits within which it must be compressed. If the number of words is given to you, this is easy; but if you are told to reduce the passage to say, a third of its length, count the number of words in the passage and divide by three. You may use fewer words than the number prescribed, but in no case may you exceed the limit.

It is not likely that your first attempt will be a complete success. The draft will probably be too long. In fact you may have to write out several drafts before you find how to express the gist of the passage fully within the limits set. A good deal of patience and revision will be required before you get it right. It is a good plan to write the first draft without having the actual words of the original passage before one’s eyes.

(b) *Important Points* – The following points must be kept in mind:-

(i) The precis should be all in your own words. It must not be a patch work made up of phrases and sentences quoted from the original.
(ii) The precis must be a connected whole. It may be divided into sections or paragraphs, according to changes in the subject matter, but these must be joined together in such a way as to read continuously.

(iii) The precis must be complete and self-contained; that is, it must convey its message fully and clearly without requiring any reference to the original to complete its meaning.

(iv) It is only the gist, main purport, or general meaning of the passage which you have to express. There is no room in a precis for colloquial expressions, circumlocutions, periphrasis or rhetorical flourishes. All redundancies of expression must be rigorously pruned. If faithful reproduction of the main theme is the first essential of a summary, conciseness is the second.

(v) The precis must be in simple, direct, grammatical and idiomatic English.

c) The Art of Compression – You are not bound to follow the original order of thought of the passage to the summarised, if you can express its meaning more clearly and concisely by transposing any of its parts.

In condensing, aim rather at remodelling than at mere omission. We may omit mere repetitions, illustrations and examples; but we change figures of speech into literal expressions, compress wordy sentences, and alter phrases to words.
Take a few examples:

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

“The account the witness gave of the incident moved everyone that heard it to laughter”.
The witness’s story was absurd.

“There came to his recollection”.
He remembered.
“The clerk who is now in his employ”.
His present clerk.

“They acted in a manner that rendered them liable to prosecution”.
They acted illegally.

“He got up and made a speech on the spur of the moment”. He spoke off-hand.

“Anil fell in to the river and, before help could reach him, he sank”. Anil was drowned in the river.

“He was hard up for money and was being pressed by his creditor”. He was in financial difficulties.

“The England of our own days is so strong and the Spain of our own days is so feeble, that it is not possible, without some reflection and care, to comprehend the full extent of the peril which England had from the power and ambition of Spain in the 16th Century”. (51 words).

We cannot nowadays fully realise what a menace Spain was to England in the 16th century. (16 words).

(d) Indirect speech – As a rule, a precis should be written in indirect speech, after a “verb saying” in the past tense. For example:

“Whether we look at the intrinsic value of our literature, or at the particular situation of this country, we shall see the strongest reason to think that of all foreign tongues the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects.” – Macaulay.

Condensed in indirect speech:-

Lord Macaulay said that England’s noble literature and the universality of her language made English the foreign language most useful for India.

The change from direct to indirect speech calls for attention to the following points:

(i) Correct sequence of tense after the “verb of saying” in the past tense.
(ii) Clear differentiation of the various persons mentioned in the passage. Care must be taken with pronouns he, she and they. To avoid confusion proper names should be used occasionally.
(iii) The correct use adverbs and other words indicating time.
(iv) Proper choice of “verbs of saying”, to indicate questions, commands, warnings, threats or exhortations.

Great care must be taken to avoid lapsing into direct speech – a very common fault. Some passages, however, are best summarised in direct speech.

3. **Revision**: When you have made your final draft, carefully revise it before you write out the fair copy. Be sure that its length is within the limits prescribed. Compare it with the original to see that you have not omitted any important point. See whether it reads well as a connected whole, and correct any mistakes in spelling and punctuation, grammar and idiom.

Then write out the fair copy neatly, prefixing the title you have chosen.

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**Points to be noted before taking up the exercise of Precis-writing:**

Write summaries of the passages enclosed herewith about one-third of the original length. The following suggestions may be taken in to consideration to finalise the draft.
1. First carefully read the passage, if necessary, several times, apprehend clearly its main theme or general meaning.
2. Examine the passage in detail, to make sure of the meaning of each sentence, phrase and word.
3. Supply a short title which will express the subject.
4. Select and note down the important points essential to the expression of the main theme.
5. Note the length or number of words prescribed for the precis, and write out a first draft.
6. In doing this remember that you are to express the gist of the passage in your own words, and not in quotations from the passage; that you should condense by remodelling rather than by mere omission; and that your precis must be self-contained and a connected whole. Add nothing; make no comment; correct no facts.
7. Revise your draft. Compare it carefully with the original to see that you have included all the important points. If it is too long, still further compress it by omitting unnecessary words and phrases or by remodelling sentences. Correct all mistakes in spelling, grammar and idiom, and see that it is properly punctuated. Let the language be simple and direct.
8. Write out neatly the fair copy under the heading you have selected.

Specimen-I
In a country where the land lord has a permanent property in the soil it will be worth his while to improve that property; at any rate he will make such an agreement with them (his tenants) as well prevent their destroying it. But when the lord of the soil himself, the rightful owner of the land, is only to become the farmer for a lease of ten years, and if he is then to be exposed to the demand of a new rent, which may perhaps be dictated by ignorance or rapacity, what hopes can there be, I will not say of improvement, but of preventing desolation? Will it not be his interest, during the early part of that term, to extract from the estate every possible advantage for himself; and if any future hopes of a permanent settlement are then held out, to exhibit his lands at the end of it in a state of ruin? I am not only of opinion that the zamindars have the best right, but from being persuaded that nothing could be so ruinous to the public interest as that the land should be retained as the property of the Government. I am also convinced that, failing the claim of right of zamindars, it would be necessary for the public good to grant a right of property in the soil to them, or to persons of other descriptions.

It is the most effectual mode for promoting the general improvement of the country, which I look upon as the important object for our present consideration.

I may safely assert that one-third of the Company’s territory in Hindustan is now a jungle inhabited only by wild beasts. Will a ten year’s lease induce any proprietor to clear away that jungle, and encourage the ryots to come and cultivate his lands, or lose all hopes of deriving any benefit from his labour, for which perhaps by that time he will hardly be repaid.

It is in the interest of the State that the landed property should fall into the hands of the most frugal and thrifty class of people, who will improve their lands and protect the ryots, and thereby promote the general prosperity of the country.

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Specimen-II

There is one great question to which we should look in all our arrangements; what is to be their final result on the character of the people? It is to be raised, or is to be lowered? Are we to be satisfied with merely securing our power and protecting the inhabitants, leaving them to sink gradually in character lower than at present; or are we to endeavour to raise their character, and to render them worthy of filling higher situations in the management of their country, and of devising plans for its improvement? It ought undoubtedly to be our aim to raise the minds of the natives, and to take care that whenever our connection with India might cease, it did not appear that the fruit of our dominion there had been to leave the people more abject and less able to govern themselves than when we found them. Many different plans may be suggested for the improvement of their character, but none of them can be successful, unless it be first laid down as a main principle of our policy, that the improvement must be made. This principle once established, we must trust to time and perseverance for realising the object of it. We have had too little experience, and are too little acquainted with the natives, to be able to determine without trial what means should be most likely to facilitate their improvement. Various measures might be suggested, which might all probably be more or less useful; but no one appears to me so well calculated to insure success as that of endeavouring to give them a higher opinion of themselves, by placing more confidence in them, by employing them in important situations, and perhaps by rendering them eligible to almost every office under Government. It is not necessary at present to define the exact limit to which their eligibility should be carried, but there seems to be no reason why they should be excluded from any office for which they are qualified, without danger to the preservation of our own ascendancy.

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(SUMMARY-I)

IN SUPPORT OF PERMANENT SETTLEMENTS

Short land revenue settlements will take away from the landlords all incentive to improve their land. The Zamindars have the best right to the land; and even if they had not, it should be given them, for government ownership of the land is not in the public interest. It is best for the State that the land should be in the hands of the most thrifty class; but no Zamindar would clear and cultivate the jungle, of which a third of the Company’s land is composed, if he had only a ten year’s lease.

(Summary-II)

TRAINING INDIA FOR SELF-GOVERNMENT

It must be our aim, in all our arrangements, to so raise the minds of the natives that, when our connection ceases, they may be more able to govern themselves than when we found them. At present we have too little experience and knowledge of the natives to adopt any one method of carrying out this principle; but we can give them a higher opinion of themselves by placing more confidence in them, by employing them in important situations, and by making them eligible for almost every office under Government.

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