

WRITING A USEFUL PRÉCIS FOR A RESEARCH ARTICLE

An important skill that academic researchers inevitably acquire is a way of writing a brief synopsis, or précis, summarizing a research article. This can be enormously useful for conducting research, as one does not have to re-read the same key articles over and over again, but rather refresh one's memory by reading their synopsis. It is a crucial step when writing a review article, such as for the *Annual Review of Sociology*, in which the objective is to summarize and critically evaluate the state of research on a given topic. It is also a handy skill to have when serving as an anonymous reviewer for a journal.

There are a number of ways of writing a précis, and individuals typically develop their own style based on what works for them. Nevertheless, there are a few features that are common among virtually all good summaries. I'll try to describe those commonalities and the way this works for one person—me. Note that most of this is just commonsense. Note also that these recommendations suggest efficient ways of reading articles, and are based on accepted normative models of how to write a research article.

I usually begin by reading the abstract, and the stated objectives of the paper. I may then flip to the substantive conclusions to get a sense of where the paper is heading, and if it is an empirical paper, I'll check the data and methods quickly before returning to page one. I highlight as I read, and make quick comments, like “yuck,” “good,” “great point,” “dumb,” “important claim,” etc. For an important paper I personally highlight a lot—my goal is to highlight the key points, so the next time I want to read the paper, all I have to do is read the highlighted passages. (I hate reading an article the second time with no highlights—it's just as much work as reading the first time.) In evaluating an article, I'll often flip back to the “objectives of the paper” section to determine if they are consistent with data, models, hypotheses, conclusions, etc.

The first step in writing a précis is to summarize the main points of the paper. What is the paper about? What is it trying to accomplish and why is this important? What are the key advances claimed by the authors? How do they do this? Here is a quick skeleton of a summary:

A. Introductory paragraph:

- What is the topic of the paper, why is it important (as argued by the authors), and how do they claim to advance our knowledge?
- What are the specific objectives of the paper that presumably advance our knowledge of this important topic?
- Usually there is a single key finding or theoretical argument that makes a contribution. What is this finding or argument? I like to state this early, and then the rest of my summary shows how the authors come up with the finding or make the argument.

B. Summary of Steps Leading to Conclusions

- For Empirical Studies
 1. Theoretical background (if different from above)
 2. Hypotheses: Are they listed? Do they follow from the theory/literature review?
 3. Methods: Are they an improvement over prior research (e.g., sample drawn, statistical methods used, cases analyzed?)
 4. Models used. (Do they follow from the theory discussed or prior findings reviewed?)
 5. Findings.
 6. Substantive conclusions: do they follow from the findings?

- For Theoretical Essays:
 1. Theoretical background: What is the theoretical issue(s) raised? Why important?
 2. Deficit in the literature: What issue has been inadequately raised or solved in prior literature (which will be raised or solved here)?
 3. Major argument: What is the author(s) major argument(s)?
 4. Conclusions: Do they follow from the major arguments, theoretical background, and deficit in the literature?

- C. Critical Evaluation
 - Here you critique the reading or set of readings, picking out the most important issue and working down from there to the least important issue (if you still have space).
 - This critique is highly variable, depending on your reading, the style of research, and the strengths or weaknesses of the reading.
 - You probably want to mention the *strengths* of the reading before moving to a critique, and then end with a balanced conclusion (e.g., great dataset, good idea, strong analysis, interesting theoretical framework, innovative theory or methods).

Here are some examples:

- General Criticisms: (a) this has been done before; (b) inadequate literature review; (c) misunderstands the literature; (d) this isn't important; (e) this isn't of sociological interest; (f) conclusions do not follow from analysis.
- Theoretical Criticisms: (a) the theories have not been presented accurately; (b) the key concepts are poorly articulated, misunderstood, or incorrectly characterized; (c) the key hypotheses are not discussed or tested; (d) the key hypotheses are not shown to derive from the theory's propositions.
- Methodological Criticisms: (a) the sample is not representative of the key population needed to be examined; (b) the sample is too small; (c) the sample is not random and sample selection bias could compromise results; (d) measures are of poor quality (unreliable or invalid) or fail to capture theoretical concepts; (e) statistical model is not appropriate for the hypotheses and data; (f) effects are too small to be meaningful.
- Criticisms of Writing and Organization: (a) writing is not clear or grammatically correct; (b) the structure of the presentation is confusing; (c) appropriate headings are not used in helpful ways; (d) paragraphs do not follow from each other; (e) theory or methods are not presented in a clear way.

All of this can be boiled down to a very concise 2 page précis! Note that you can do this for a group of readings, making the summary very terse and restricting your critical comments to the most important issues and, in particular, issues that cross-cut individual readings. I test my précis by reading it over and checking to see if I have captured the essence of the paper and described both the major strengths and weaknesses. Doing this well will allow you to write book reviews, critical essays, and reviews of articles for journals. More on this later.