Writing an Argument Summary: 
*Rhetorical Précis*¹

Students must learn how to analyze arguments—whether they are written or spoken—and accurately describe the rhetorical techniques used in the work. One way to prepare students for this type of thinking is to engage them in a reading and writing exercise called a rhetorical précis. There are two purposes for a rhetorical précis: the first, to practice writing a concise summary of an argument; and the second, to demonstrate comprehension of the complexities and nuances inherent in sophisticated discourse. The rhetorical précis includes five parts. The following outlines the information you should include in each of the five parts.

**Part 1:** Introduce the writer or speaker, the text, and the central claim.

**Part 2:** Explain how the author develops or advances the argument.

**Part 3:** State the author’s purpose in writing the text.

**Part 4:** Describe the intended audience and the author’s relationship to the audience.

**Part 5:** Explain the significance of the work.

**Part 1: Introduce the writer or speaker, the text, and the central claim.**

**Sample**

In the essay “The Space-Taker Effect,” Jenny While, a senior at El Cajon Valley High School, argues that students who are unmotivated and misbehave take away from the learning environment and cause teachers to slow down and lower expectations. According to While, these “space-takers take away valuable instructional time,” leaving little for those who want to learn.

**Template:**

In _____________________ _________________________________ , _____________________________ , (type of text) (title of text) (author's first and last name) __________________________________________ , __________________________________ , (information about the author) (verb, e.g., claims, argues, asserts, etc.) that ______________________________________________________________________________________ (Paraphrase or quote the central claim and include other essential sub-claims.)

Part 2: Explain how the author develops or advances the argument.

When completing this section of the précis, consider how the author has developed or supported his or her central claim. What does the writer or speaker do in each paragraph and in each section? For instance, authors will illustrate an idea, describe an event, share an anecdote, draw a comparison, or do some other work. The explanation for this section typically follows the sequence of ideas in the text.

Sample

She supports this claim by first describing the types of students who “take up space” in her school. Then, she makes a connection between her school’s poor performance on state and local exams and the “space-takers” who have done very little to prepare themselves for these high-stakes tests. Toward the end of the essay, While challenges the effectiveness of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and outlines its limitations.

Template:

_____________________ this claim by first ____________________________________________________
(He/She) (supports/develops) (Explain what the author is doing: verb.)
_____________________ ______________________________________________________________________
_____________________ ______________________________________________________________________
Then, ___________________________________________________________
(Explain what the author does next.)
_____________________ ______________________________________________________________________
_____________________ ______________________________________________________________________
(Use a prepositional phrase like “Toward the end of the text,” “In the section,” or some other phrase in order to add variety to your writing.)
Part 3: State the author’s purpose in writing the text.

Sample

While's purpose is to call attention to the flaws in educating all students—especially those who outwardly reject the opportunity—in order to prompt schools and districts to formulate practical solutions for low-performing students while taking care of those who want to learn.

Template:

__________________________’s purpose is to ________________________________

(author’s last name)

________________________________________________________________________________________

in order to _________________________________________________________________________________

(What does the author want the audience to do or feel as a result of this work?)

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

Part 4: Describe the intended audience and the author’s relationship to the audience.

Sample

She establishes a formal tone for educators, politicians, and concerned parents who have children in high school. Although she is writing to an adult audience, her message extends to her peers—high school students.

Template:

________________________ establishes __________________________ for ________________________

(He/She) 

(Describe the tone of the author.)

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

(What is the relationship between the author and his/her audience?)

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________
Part 5: Explain the significance of this work.

Sample

This work is significant because it challenges those in education to rethink classroom dynamics. Specifically, she addresses how the various skill levels and attitudes in one classroom can affect the quality of learning.

Template:

This work is significant because ______________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

The complete précis

In her essay “Don’t Take Valuable Space in My School,” Jenny While, a senior at El Cajon Valley High School, argues that students who are unmotivated and misbehave take away from the learning environment and cause teachers to slow down and lower expectations. According to While, these “space-takers take away valuable instructional time,” leaving little for those who want to learn. She supports this claim by first describing the types of students who “take up space” in her school. Then, she makes a connection between her school’s poor performance on state and local exams and the “space-takers” who have done very little to prepare themselves for these high-stakes tests. Toward the end of the essay, While challenges the effectiveness of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and outlines its limitations. While’s purpose is to call attention to the flaws in educating all students—especially those who outwardly reject the opportunity—in order to prompt schools and districts to formulate practical solutions for low-performing students while taking care of those who want to learn. She establishes a formal tone for educators, politicians, and concerned parents who have children in high school. Although she is writing to an adult audience, her message extends to her peers—high school students. This work is significant because it challenges those in education to rethink classroom dynamics. Specifically, she addresses how the various skill levels and attitudes in one classroom can affect the quality of learning.