

## Writing a précis

A précis is a short summary of a work. Writing a précis of a work is a good way of understanding it because it forces you to be concise and exclude any extraneous material. It also compels you to reflect on the author's purpose and the supporting arguments that a writer uses. A précis is not simply a summary of a work, but it should also preserve the logic and emphasis of the article or book chapter. You will find it invaluable in your degree because as you read through many works, it will be a much quicker way of reminding yourself of the core arguments and structure of the works without having to re-read them.

However, in this case, you are writing a précis of the report you will submit in the first week of next term, which means that you are reflecting on a work that has yet to be written. **It is therefore fair to assume that the logic of the arguments in your report will differ from those offered in the précis.** This is inevitable, as your research will lead you into areas that you haven't yet considered, and you might find greater interest in different questions and problems related to your chosen topic. **Don't worry** – if there is a difference between the arguments in the précis and the report, this won't affect your assessment. However, you have been asked to write the précis now in order to reflect on the arguments related to your chosen topic and to think about how you will go about writing on it.

A précis is provided below. You are encouraged to treat this only as an example and you don't have to follow it exactly. You might, for example, prefer to use bullet points to clarify the specific arguments you wish to make. You are not obliged to write about one of the topics covered on this course (a list of possible topics was provided in an earlier lecture).

**You are expected to include a correctly formatted bibliography.** Remember the points made in a previous lecture. Note also that the department doesn't encourage a specific style of bibliography, but it should be consistent. Please also remember that articles are formatted differently from book chapters. See the slides from Lecture 3 for good and bad examples of a bibliography.

### Tips for writing a précis:

- Read through a few articles on your chosen topic so that you understand what the key debates and questions are and where you want to position yourself in relation to them. You will be able to find appropriate articles online using the skills learned from the Week 4 lectures. **Note: even if you use a topic covered by one of the lectures on the course, you will be expected to come up with your own bibliography.**
- Write the précis in your own words (i.e. don't repeat the words used by the authors of the articles you use for research)

- Write it from your own perspective (i.e. what you will argue and how you will structure your argument)
- Make it clear what the key terms are
- Make sure the central thesis is clear and coherent
- Specify the main points

## **Example**

Here is an example of a précis:

### **Against Euthanasia**

As recently as this week, the Director of Public Prosecutions has claimed that he will relax the guidelines on assisted suicide. This means that doctors and nurses who assist severely disabled or terminally ill patients to die are less likely to face criminal charges in Britain.

My report will examine this recent addition to the debate about euthanasia. I will begin by defining the key terms and also the main distinctions between 'active' and 'passive' euthanasia and also 'voluntary' and 'involuntary'. I will then provide an argument in support of the pro-euthanasia side of the debate, making use of Michael Tooley's article (see bibliography). Tooley argues that there are circumstances in which acts of active voluntary euthanasia are morally permissible; he also argues that, nonetheless, there should not be any laws prohibiting these actions. I will then argue against Tooley (and the claims made by the Director of Public Prosecutions) by adapting arguments from Callahan's essay (see bibliography). I will show that Tooley's argument, though valid, is not sound. Tooley focuses on the individual and the act of assisted suicide as a rational act in order to highlight cases of voluntary active euthanasia. Against this, I will argue that the act of suicide does not only concern the individual; that is, it is not just a private act but also a social act that has consequences for others and that we have a responsibility to those we love. In addition, I will cite Callahan's use of the Dutch experiment to show that what is often considered to be voluntary euthanasia has often turned out to be non-voluntary and that this can lead to an abuse of the law. I will also argue that changes in the law will place a moral responsibility on the severely disabled and terminally ill to have to choose to end their lives in order to relieve their loved ones from pain.

I will end by acknowledging the inconsistencies in my argument (namely, the responsibility of the severely disabled and terminally ill not to end their lives because of the impact it will have on others, and also the responsibility to end their lives to relieve their loved ones from pain) and I will use this contradiction to show that the debate is far more complex than has been portrayed in the media's reporting of the Director of Public Prosecution's declaration. Finally, I will reinforce the claim that a change in the laws can lead to a slippery slope in the debate, a point on which Tooley and I are in agreement.

### **Bibliography**

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Tooley, Michael. 2014. In *Contemporary Debates in Applied Ethics*, Andrew I. Cohen and Christopher Heath Wellman (eds.). (Oxford: Blackwells), pp.65-81.

Van der Maas, P.J. 1992. *Euthanasia and Other Decisions at the End of Life*. (Amsterdam: Elsevier).