A rhetorical précis analyzes both the content (the what) and the delivery (the how) of a unit of spoken or written discourse. It is a highly structured four-sentence paragraph blending summary and analysis. Each of the four sentences requires specific information; students are expected to use brief quotations (to convey a sense of the author’s style and tone) and to include a terminal bibliographic reference. Practicing this sort of writing fosters precision in both reading and writing, forcing a writer to employ a variety of sentence structures and to develop a discerning eye for connotative shades of meaning.

1. The first sentence identifies the essay’s author and title, provides the article’s date in parentheses, uses a rhetorically accurate verb (claims, asserts, suggests, argues—) followed by a “that” clause containing the essay’s thesis.

   EXAMPLE: In “The Ugly Truth about Beauty” (1998), Dave Barry satirizes the unnecessary ways that women obsess about their physical appearance.

2. The second sentence conveys the author’s support for the thesis (how the author develops the essay); the trick is to convey a good sense of the breadth of the author’s support / examples, usually in chronological order.

   EXAMPLE: Barry illuminates this discrepancy by juxtaposing men’s perceptions of their looks (“average-looking”) with women’s (“not good enough”), by contrasting female role models (Barbie, Cindy Crawford) with male role models (He-Man, Buzz-Off), and by comparing men’s interests (the Super Bowl, lawn care) with women’s (manicures).

3. The third sentence analyzes the author’s purpose using an “in order to” statement:

   EXAMPLE: He exaggerates and stereotypes these differences in order to prevent women from so eagerly accepting society’s expectation of them; to this end, Barry claims that men who want women to “look like Cindy Crawford” are “idiots”(10), implying that women who adhere to the Crawford standard are fools as well.

4. The fourth sentence describes the essay’s target audience and characterizes the author’s relationship with that audience.

   EXAMPLE: Barry ostensibly addresses men in this essay because he opens and closes the essay directly addressing men (as in “If you’re a man...”) and offering to give them advice in a mockingly conspiratorial fashion; however, by using humor to poke fun at both men and women’s perceptions of themselves, Barry makes his essay palatable to women as well, hoping to convince them to stop obsessively “thinking they need to look like Barbie” (8).