

Ms. Moser  
AP Lang and Comp

### **The Columnist Rhetorical Précis/Response Project**

**The Assignment:** As a means of keeping abreast of current public discourse and to practice analyzing rhetoric, you will be following a national columnist in a newspaper or online. You must collect five current, (preferably) consecutive columns by your author. Columnists can be found online in Time, Newsweek, or other news publications, or in newspapers such as The New York Times, Washington Post, or other news publications. The Juneau Empire does feature columnists occasionally, but not on a regular basis. When you identify a columnist you are interested in, check your columnist's web site weekly as they often charge you to retrieve articles older than one or two weeks.

The assignment has four MAJOR parts:

1. 5 articles by the same columnist printed off and annotated.
2. A précis for each column.
3. A response/ analysis of your columnist.
4. An original column written by you mimicking your columnist's style.

Details for each:

#### **Part 1. Five articles by the same columnist printed off and annotated.**

Each article must be annotated for the following:

- Speaker's tone and possible tone shifts
- Rhetorical strategies
- Organization and arrangement
- Aristotelian appeals (logos, pathos, ethos)

Mark places in the text that evoke a reaction from you, be it laughter, anger, or confusion.

Some questions to ask yourself as you read:

- How does s/he open and close the column?
- How soon does s/he announce the thesis?
- How does s/he organize? What are the parts or sections of the column?
- How much is based on observation? Personal experience? Interviews? Fact?
- What sort of diction characterizes the columnist? Use your diction hand out for this.
- What sort of syntax characterizes the columnist?
- What audience does s/he assume? How do you know?
- What unstated assumptions does the columnist make?
- What are the potential ramifications of the issues addressed in the column?

## 2. A précis for each of the five above columns:

After annotating, write a one-page précis/response for each of the five articles.

### Rhetorical Précis

A précis is a shortening, in your own words, of a text. You are to describe as accurately and briefly as possible the substance or main ideas contained in a text in four well-worded, insightful, precise sentences.

A précis is a type of summarizing that insists on an exact reproduction of the logic and organization and emphasis of the original texts. An effective précis retains the logic, development, and argument of the original in much shorter form.

A précis must possess clear, emphatic diction and effective sentence construction. Its unity and coherence should be emphasized through smooth, unobtrusive transitions. Your summary must be intelligible to a reader, especially one who has not seen the original, and should have solid compositional worth. (100-200 words)

### How to Write a Précis

**First Sentence:** In a single coherent sentence identify the essay's author and title, provide the article's date in parentheses, use a rhetorically accurate verb (claims, asserts, suggests, argues, deny, refute, prove, etc.) followed by a "that clause," and the essay's thesis (major claim). Example: In his "In Defense of Prejudice" (1995), Jonathan Rauch argues that prejudice in society should not be eliminated.

In the article "Why You Are Wrong" by Joe Donatelli (June 18, 2014) he is sarcastically mocking people who follow the typical mind-set of formulaic rhetoric. He develops his point by making empty claims using arguments that are missing facts, statistics and evidence. Donatelli attempts to expose people to weak arguments and empty rhetoric in order to steer them away from using or believing such techniques. His intended audience

**Second Sentence:** In a single coherent sentence give an explanation of how the author develops and supports the major claim.

Example: Rauch supports his position by providing anecdotal and historical evidence culled from segments of society which illustrates the futility and harm associated with attempts to eliminate prejudice.

**Third Sentence:** In a single coherent sentence give a statement of the author’s purpose, followed by an “in order to” phrase.

Example: Rauch hopes to shift the paradigm away from absolutism, the idea of punitive action against racism and prejudice, in order to move society toward rejection, the idea of societal pressure when grappling with racist and prejudicial attitudes.

**Fourth Sentence:** In a single coherent sentence give a description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

Example: The author uses erudite, yet defensive tone indicating that he primarily addresses a rather liberal intellectual audience.

**Another example:**

Charles S. Peirce’s article, “The Fixation of Belief” (1877), asserts that humans have psychological and social mechanisms designed to protect and cement (or fix) our beliefs. Peirce supports this claim with descriptions of four methods of fixing belief, pointing out the effectiveness and potential weakness of each method. Peirce’s purpose is to point out the ways that people commonly establish their belief systems in order to jolt the awareness of the reader into considering how their own belief system may be the product of such methods and to consider what Peirce calls “the method of science” as a progressive alternative to the other three. Given the technical language used in the article, Peirce is writing to a well-educated audience with some knowledge of philosophy and history and a willingness to examine other ways of thinking.

**Part 3: Analysis/ Reaction Paper of your columnist**

How to Write the Reaction Paper

First Paragraph: A simple listing of the articles that you read over the last six weeks. List the author, articles with dates, and place of publication.

Example: I read: “The New Untouchables” (9/11/09), “The Power in 11/9” (9/18/09), “Our Three Bombs” (9/25/09), “The New Sputnik” (10/2/09), “Real Men Tax Gas” (10/16/09), and “Have a Nice Day” (10/23/09) by Thomas L. Friedman of the New York Times.

Second Paragraph: Describe the publication in terms of focus, demographics, and influence. Use researched facts and statements from the company to support your statements.

Example: The New York Times is the largest urban and daily newspaper in The United States. Although it is a New York based newspaper, it is read nationally and internationally. The New York Times has won 101 Pulitzer Prizes, far more than any other news organization. It averages about 4.7 million readers per week and 1.1 million readers per day, with an audience comprised of literate, educated people interested in news and current events. It is highly recognized throughout The United States as an esteemed and influential newspaper. The Times covers everything from politics to sports and includes writers such the syndicated columnist Bob Herbert, the author of *Promised Betrayed: Waking Up From the American Dream*.

Third Paragraph: Describe the author's choice of content and the author's style. This will be the bulk of your writing and you MUST consider all aspects of the rhetorical situation in this paragraph. Use evidence from your readings to support your statements.

Example: Noonan shares her opinions on almost everything from current events like this year's Nobel Peace Prize Recipient to the Obama Health Care Plan and the decrease in elder political figures. She tends to write from a center-right perspective, although attempts to appeal to both left and right end of the political spectrum. Sarcasm is very present in her columns, and she defines her opinions through her diction, for example referring to him as "Mr. Obama" or "the president" but never as "President Obama." She presents her opinion as an aid to the American people, phrasing her argument as a representation of the citizen's emotions accompanied by the statistics and quotations necessary to appeal to the logos of her audience. In her column regarding the expanding divide in the country by the President's agenda, Noonan writes, "the president purred," drawing a parallel to a cat, a self-serving pet with no compromises, no backing down. She has a large sentence variety, from compelling, comma-filled sentences, to short yet poignant ones following, keeping the reader interested.

Fourth Paragraph: State your opinion of the author and his or her viewpoints. Use evidence from your readings to support your statements.

Example: The views Surowieki expresses are non-biased, and fairly consistent with what other leading economists contend. Many of his articles merely explain the effects of policy or theory, with little or no subjective input. Yet, when Surowieki does include his opinion,

most of it is based on former data and other economic fact, which makes his assertions hard to argue against. Overall, I enjoyed reading Surowieki's articles and my knowledge of the subject presented in his columns has been expanded indefinitely. I appreciate the work Surowieki is passionately pursuing, educating the general public about important financial information and policies. Economics has always been tagged as the "dull science, filled with dull wit;" yet, Surowieki sheds a light of interest on topics that are often overlooked by other media outlets.

Fifth Paragraph: Describe the author in one descriptive, concise statement.

Example: Jonah Lehrer, as a columnist, is interesting, descriptive, instructive and analytical, with a hint of sarcasm.

#### **4. An original column written by you mimicking your columnist's style.**

Write an ORIGINAL column using your own idea about a current or past topic mimicking the style of your columnist. Do not simply address one argument raised in the columns, but create your own argument based on your perception of the columnist's ideological positions, as you have perceived them. You should COPY STYLE NOT IDEAS!

Consider:

- a tangential issue you might expect your columnist to address;
- how the columnist might address this issue;
- your expectations of the columnist's position on the issue;

This piece should demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of their point of view on issues, if they are conservative or liberal, funny or serious, well-read or more casual, their choices on syntax and diction, and any nuances of their column.

This should be MLA format and should be the length of an average column written by your columnist.