

Abstracts and Précis

Abstracts and précis are two distinct writing forms, both aimed at summarizing or encapsulating a longer argument.

An abstract is a way of talking about an argument. The author of the abstract “goes meta” by stepping outside of the argument and describing it. The author of an abstract tells us the thesis which is defended and describes the premises of the argument, but does not actually argue for the thesis or the premises.

A précis is a way of distilling an argument to its core details, presenting a skeletal version of the argument. In a précis, as in the full version of the argument, the author defends a thesis. In contrast to an abstract, the author of a précis does not step outside of the argument to describe it; she does the arguing.

This difference between performing an act (a précis) and describing the act that you perform (an abstract) should be easy to grasp, in principle. In philosophy, it is sometimes difficult to see. You might think about the difference between the roles of Socrates and Plato in Plato’s dialogues. Plato writes about the arguments, but Socrates does the arguing.

For an example, here are both a précis and an abstract of Descartes’s First Meditation. I’ve written both, taking Descartes’s role. You should be able to figure out which is the précis and which is the abstract.

In the First Meditation, I start by describing some mistakes that we all make, and argue that these mistakes rest on implicit assumptions worth questioning. Among these assumptions are the veridicality of sense perception and the security of mathematical beliefs. Then, I present three arguments which are intended to undermine those assumptions. First, I show that our sense experience is often misleading. Second, I remind the reader that there is no reliable mark to distinguish waking experience from dreaming experiences. Third, I show that a demon deceiver could undermine even our most secure beliefs. At the end of the First Meditation, I conclude that all of our beliefs are doubtful.

All of our beliefs rely on implicit assumptions about ourselves and the world. Among these assumptions are the veridicality of sense experience and the security of mathematical beliefs. There are three reasons to question these assumptions. First, sense experience is often misleading. Second, we have experiences while dreaming which are, at least at times, indistinguishable from our experiences when we are awake. Since we cannot surely distinguish our real sense experiences from our dreamed ones, we can not be sure about any of our beliefs based on sensation. Third, even mathematical beliefs, which are not based on sense experience, may be questioned, since a demon deceiver could implant in us the surety we feel when we consider a mathematical claim, like that $2+3=5$. All of our beliefs are thus doubtful.

One way to present a précis is to regiment an argument into premise and conclusion form. Here’s a précis of the indispensability argument in the philosophy of mathematics.

- P1. We should believe only in the theory that best accounts for our sense experience.
- P2. If we believe in a theory, we must believe in all of its ontological commitments.
- P3. The ontological commitments of any theory are the objects over which that theory first-order quantifies.
- P4. The theory which best accounts for our sense experience first order quantifies over mathematical objects.
- C. We should believe that mathematical objects exist.

It is of course not necessary to formulate your précis in deductively valid form, but it can be a useful exercise.