

Sixty Steps to Précis

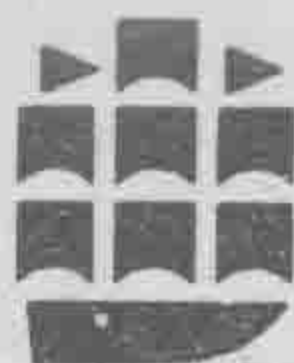
A NEW APPROACH
TO SUMMARY-WRITING
FOR OVERSEAS STUDENTS

L.G.ALEXANDER

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Preface to the First Edition

SIXTY STEPS TO PRÉCIS has been designed to meet the needs of overseas students preparing for the Cambridge First Certificate in English and Certificate of Proficiency in English examinations. It may, however, be found useful in secondary schools with pupils who have not got an intuitive grasp of précis-writing and need to be taught it systematically. The book should be used over a three-year period (spending one year on Part I and two years on Part II) with adult students in their third or fourth year of study and school-children about fifteen years old who have completed an elementary English language course with parallel reading material over a period of four or five years.

The passages in the book have been arranged in the order of increasing difficulty. This arrangement is fairly obvious in Part I, where the vocabulary, précis work, language exercises, and subject-matter become progressively harder. In Part II, however, there can be no real yardstick to assess difficulty, and while the comprehension work becomes more difficult, some of the précis exercises may be found to vary in level.

Part I consists entirely of narrative pieces which have all been specially written for précis and comprehension work. It should be remembered that students whose mother-tongue is not English very often have no exercise equivalent to précis-writing in their own language. For this reason the vague instruction 'Write a précis of the above piece in so many words' is meaningless and students frequently do little more than string together unconnected sentences taken from the passages. Many fail to learn to write good précis simply because they are taught to summarize whole passages from the very beginning without having any clear idea of what they are doing and why they are doing it. In Part I, the student is *not* required to write a 'précis' in the true sense of the word. Rather, he is given exact instructions what to do and is told beforehand what material to include in his précis and what to omit. The student is thus given a valuable introduction to précis-writing and the experience he gains after a year's work at Part I should stand him in good stead when he comes on to Part II.

In Part II, a number of extracts from various modern authors have been interspersed among the pieces specially written for précis work. At this stage the student is required to write formal précis and to cope with passages which differ greatly in style and cover a wide range of subject-matter.

In the notes headed 'To the Student' which precede each part of the book, I have indicated how a précis might be written and have added model answers to actual passages. Students and even perhaps teachers might find it helpful to refer to them.

It is a good idea to follow up précis and comprehension work with essay-writing. For this purpose, two essay topics have been added at the end of each passage. Since the topics are related to the pieces they follow, the passages may serve as models when teaching essay-writing and (this applies especially to Part II) should provide plenty of material for discussions and debates. Furthermore, I would suggest that students be frequently given paragraphs for dictation taken from pieces they have already summarized.

The exercises in this book should do more than just provide practice in answering examination questions. They should help students to understand what they read, and it is hoped that the passages will prove sufficiently stimulating to encourage them to think for themselves and express their own ideas both orally and in writing.

I would like to express my thanks to my colleague, Mr. H. Hogg, B.A., for testing a great number of pieces on school-children and adult learners of English and for making many valuable suggestions.

L. G. A.

Preface to the Second Edition

A second edition of *Sixty Steps to Précis* has been prepared so that the exercises will be in line with current thinking about language-teaching. However, the basic aims outlined in the original preface remain unchanged. The book sets out to teach students summary-writing by training them to answer a specific question on a text. The principle behind this type of exercise is as valid today as it was when *Sixty Steps* was first written. The texts, therefore, have not been altered and the questions on summary-writing have been only slightly modified in places.

The new features introduced in this edition mainly affect the comprehension and language exercises and may be summarised as follows:

PART I

1. Six multiple choice questions have been devised to accompany each of the thirty texts. Questions 1 and 2 test the student's understanding of the main points in the texts; questions 3 and 4 deal with structural words and usage; questions 5 and 6 deal with lexical items.
2. Exercises on sentence structure have been added: the student is required to rewrite or join sentences and then to check his answers against the text.
3. There is greater variety in the composition exercises. The student is required to write dialogue, letters, etc., as well as narrative and description. Difficult topics have been wholly excluded.

PART II

1. Questions dealing mainly with sentence structure have been added to accompany each of the thirty texts. The student is required to rewrite or join sentences, etc., and to check his answers against the text.
2. Some of the original exercises on summary-writing have been modified slightly.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking the large number of teachers who have written to me about this book since it was first published. Many useful suggestions have been incorporated in this edition.

L.G.A.

Contents

	page
Preface to the First Edition	iv
Preface to the Second Edition	vi
Part I	
To the Student	1
Passages 1-30	7
Part II	
To the Student	69
Passages 31-60	75

PART I

To the Student

As a general rule, you should write your *précis* *after* you have answered the questions on the passage, as you will then be better acquainted with the passage itself. You will find six questions beside each text. Questions 1 and 2 test your understanding of the piece; questions 3 and 4 deal with grammatical problems; questions 5 and 6 deal with vocabulary. You have a choice of four answers to each question and are asked to choose the best one. An exercise on sentence structure follows these questions. In this you will be asked to rewrite or join sentences and you can check your answer immediately by referring to the text.

How to write a *précis*

1. Read the passage carefully *twice*.
2. Read the instructions carefully to find out precisely what you are required to do, marking in on the original passage the point at which you should begin to write your *précis* and where you should end it.
3. Read the passage a third time, making a list of all the points you will have to use. *These notes should be very brief.*
4. Using this list of points, write a *rough draft* of the *précis*, referring to the original passage only when you want to make sure of some point. This will help you greatly to reproduce the substance of the passage in your own words. The number of words should be counted when you have finished the rough draft, *not* after each sentence.
5. After having counted the number of words in the draft and made any alterations you think necessary, write out a *fair copy* of your *précis* in a single paragraph, stating the exact number of words you have used at the end.

When you re-read your fair copy, there are two more points you should bear in mind. First, your precis must be *accurate*. You must learn to derive *all* your information from the passage and never distort the meaning of the original or add to it. Secondly, your précis should be written in such a way that it reads as *a continuous paragraph*. To achieve this, you should use link-words like 'but', 'and', 'however', 'also', etc., to connect your points. When you have become proficient at this, you should try connecting your points by writing complex sentences, (i.e. beginning a sentence with words like 'since', 'though', 'even if', 'when', 'after', 'before', etc.).

Study the model answers to the passages that follow, noting carefully how the précis has been written in each case.

The sentry watched a hawk that hovered overhead, looking for some unsuspecting prey to pounce upon. Then he heard the distant, muffled roar of planes, then silence. For the past week he had been told to take note of everything that happened on the 5 hill within his range of vision, and to report anything suspicious. The hill led to an experimental factory, where new and secret weapons were tested. There was a threat of war and the factory would be invaluable to the enemy. So the approaches to it were watched day in, day out.

10 He shifted his position; he felt that he had been crouching in the heather since the beginning of time, but only a couple of hours of this day's duty had passed. Suddenly he saw something falling from the sky like snow, only it was not snow. [He put out his hand and caught bits that were drifting near him. They were thin 15 strips of metal to confuse delicate instruments, so that it would not be possible to detect the landing of enemy craft. Next he heard a long, low, continuous roar from the east and saw bundles descending from the sky which looked like umbrellas opening, but which he knew to be parachutes with men hanging from them. 20 He wanted to go at once to give the alarm, but he had to be sure that the parachutists were not his own men out on an exercise. The men were on the ground now. One of them pointed in the direction of the secret factory and they all began marching towards it. He had no more doubts and set off at once down the

25 hill. He crawled slowly, sometimes on his stomach, sometimes on his side, weaving himself a path through the heather down to the stream. Once there, he decided that he had ample cover and started to run. But he had erred, for bullets were soon whistling past him. He dropped flat on the ground. Nobody came to search
30 for him, so he counted up to a hundred and then began crawling again. He moved tortuously and as silently as he could to his camp at the foot of the hill.]

Describe *in not more than 80 words* what the sentry saw and did from the moment when the strips of metal fell from the sky until he got back to his camp. Use your own words as far as possible. Do not include anything that is not in the passage.

(Cambridge Lower Certificate in English Examination.)

MODEL

1. *Points (Saw and Did)*

1. Put out hand; caught strip metal.
2. Saw bundles.
3. Waited.
4. Saw men on ground.
5. One pointed; all marched.
6. Went downhill.
7. Crawled—stomach, side—to stream.
8. Started running.
9. Dropped flat (why?—bullets).
10. Counted 100; crawled.
11. Silently to camp.

2. *Rough Draft (Linking of Points)*

When the sentry held out his hand to catch what was falling out of the sky, he found that it was strips of metal. Then bundles began coming down. The sentry waited until men appeared on the ground. One of them pointed and the sentry saw them march towards the factory. Crawling on his stomach and on his side, the sentry moved downhill. He began running when he came to a stream, but dropped

down when he was shot at. After counting up to a hundred to himself, he began crawling silently again downhill.

(95 words)

3. *Fair Copy (Corrected Draft)*

After catching hold of metal strips falling out of the sky, the sentry saw bundles descending and, after a time, some men appeared on the ground. One of them pointed, and they all began marching towards the factory. The sentry crawled downhill on his stomach and his side. When he came to a stream, he began running but dropped down when the men shot at him. He counted up to a hundred, then silently started crawling again towards his camp.

(80 words)

We reached a point where the path crossed a motor road under construction, and we could see that it ran through a cutting made in the side of a steep hill. Men were working in the cutting, and there were more men far up the hillside above it. The bed of the cutting was full of huge boulders which were to form the foundation of the road.

Over these boulders we picked our way with difficulty, jumping from one to the other like so many goats. In the middle of them I stopped to take a photograph, while the others went on ahead. [Suddenly I heard shouts, followed by a dull sound of an explosion from the hillside above me. Looking up, I found I was now alone in the cutting. The smoke of a blasting charge floated out against the blue sky, and an enormous rock was bounding savagely down the hill.

I had no doubt where it was going to land. It was going to land on me. This opinion was clearly shared by the men who had released the boulder, as they were gesticulating wildly two hundred yards above me. I made a prodigious leap from my rock to the next. The galloping boulder bumped against the hillside, kicked up a cloud of dust, and slightly changed direction. It was still coming straight for me. There was nothing to be done but to take cover if I could find any; otherwise the prospect before me was one of almost certain death. I glanced hastily around. Just as I was resigning myself to inevitable disaster, I noticed a narrow

25 opening between two rocks quite near me. I reached this in time, wedged myself in and shut my eyes. With a tremendous thud the mass of rock struck the ground and came to rest a few feet away from me.] It hardly splintered at all, and none of the splinters came my way. It was indeed a miraculous escape.

Describe *in not more than 80 words* what happened from the moment the writer heard the sound of the explosion until the mass of rock came to rest. Use your own words as far as possible. Do not include anything that is not in the passage.

(Cambridge Lower Certificate in English Examination.)

MODEL

1. *Points (What happened)*

1. Explosion—smoke—sky.
2. Rock bounded savagely.
3. Men above gesticulated.
4. Writer jumped—next rock.
5. Boulder hit hillside—dust.
6. Came towards him.
7. Glanced round.
8. Noticed opening—2 rocks.
9. Wedged himself in.
10. Rock struck ground, thud.
11. Stopped near him.

2. *Rough Draft (Linking of Points)*

After the explosion, the writer saw smoke drifting across the sky and a big rock rolling wildly down the hill. The men above waved to him to warn him of the danger and the writer jumped on to the next rock. Then the boulder struck the side of the hill and raised a cloud of dust. It then came towards the writer, who quickly looked around for cover. He noticed a gap between two rocks and wedged himself between them. The boulder struck the ground with a thud and stopped quite near him.

(92 words)

3.

Fair Copy (Corrected Draft)

After the explosion, smoke appeared in the sky and a great boulder came rolling wildly downhill. Above, the workmen waved to the writer warning him of the danger and he jumped on to a nearby rock. After striking the hillside and raising a cloud of dust, the boulder moved towards the man. Quickly glancing round for shelter, he noticed a gap between two rocks and wedged himself in it as the boulder thudded against the ground and then stopped still.

(80 words)

PASSAGES 1 TO 30

Early next morning the man left the little village where he had spent the night. He took the narrow, winding, country road which he knew led to a small town some twelve miles away. After walking for two hours, he came to a path which cut across country and led directly to the town. Leaving the road, the man passed through a gate and was soon walking along the path. The fields were deserted. To the left and right of the path, corn sheaves were arranged in neat rows. The only sign of human habitation was a small farmhouse across the fields where the brilliant morning sun was reflected in the windows.

Suddenly the man heard the low hum of an engine. At first he thought that it must be a car travelling along the road he had recently left. He expected the noise to fade away in the distance. Instead, it grew louder and louder and seemed to be coming from above. He looked up quickly and saw an aeroplane cutting a crazy, zig-zag path across the sky. It disappeared for an instant behind some clouds, then emerged and plunged towards the field. The aeroplane was coming towards him. He gazed at it terrified and immediately took cover in a small hollow in the field, his eyes following the course of the aeroplane the whole time. As he watched it, he felt sure it would crash and burst into flames before his eyes. Then, as if by a miracle, it pulled out of the dive and touched down on the field. The aeroplane bounced wildly across the uneven ground carrying away anything that lay in its path. In a matter of seconds, it crashed through a hedge only a few yards away from where the man was crouching. After that, all was still. The man stood up dazed. For a moment he thought of running to the farmhouse and asking for help; but he changed his mind and rushed towards the gap in the hedge.

Exercises

Multiple Choice Questions

Choose the best answer in each exercise: *a, b, c* or *d*.

1. While he was walking towards the town, the man
 - a.* didn't meet anybody.
 - b.* saw someone near a small farmhouse.
 - c.* kept to the road.
 - d.* noticed that the sun was rising.
2. When he first heard the noise, he
 - a.* realized that it was a car.
 - b.* didn't realize that it was an aeroplane.
 - c.* realized that it was an aeroplane.
 - d.* didn't realize that it was a car.
3. He knew it led to a small town . . . twelve miles away. (l.3)
 - a.* near; *b.* for; *c.* about; *d.* already
4. He expected . . . away in the distance. (l.13)
 - a.* to fade the noise; *b.* the noise would fade; *c.* for the noise to fade;
 - d.* that the noise fade.
5. *neat* (line 8) means: *a.* tidy; *b.* clean; *c.* long; *d.* short
6. *cutting a crazy zig-zag path* (ll.15-16) means: *a.* moving in a straight line; *b.* moving wildly from left to right; *c.* going mad; *d.* tearing up a path

Sentence Structure

Rewrite this sentence, then check your answer against the text:

He walked for two hours before he came to a path.

After . . . (ll.3-4)

Summary and Composition

1. *In not more than 80 words* describe what the man saw and did from the time he heard the engine to the moment he ran towards the hedge.
2. A foreign visitor telephoned from his hotel to say he would like to see you. Write him a short letter of about 100 words explaining to him how he can best get to your home.

The motor-race was not due to begin until 2.30 and the large crowd cheered loudly when at 2.15 the first cars were wheeled out to take up their positions. So many racing-cars gathered together were a rare and splendid sight. Shining red, blue, and silver in the bright sunshine, they looked rather like jet-aeroplanes without wings. On the course, drivers dressed in helmets were talking to each other or standing by their cars, while engineers checked the engines for the last time. Soon a great many people began arriving at the starting-point and the crowd broke into clapping when the two champions, Mercer and Torres, arrived on the scene.

At 2.30 sharp there was a pistol-shot followed by a roar of engines. The race had begun and in a few seconds the cars were fighting for first place. All the cars got off well except No. 5, which refused to start and was hurriedly wheeled off the track.

From the very beginning it seemed as if the race would be entirely between Torres and Mercer, for they were soon in front of the others. A small blue car with an unknown driver at the wheel was following close behind, but was not near enough to offer the champions any serious challenge. The cars flashed by like bullets and there were cheers when Mercer's car took the lead. But this did not last long, for after a while he seemed to be having trouble and he stopped his big silver car to have a wheel changed. Though this was done at great speed, it gave Torres time enough to get well in front. There seemed little chance for Mercer to catch up now. The only car anywhere near Torres was the blue one—until something went wrong with it. On a dangerous bend it got out of control, spun round several times, and shot up the side of the bank. Its driver steered it skilfully back on to the course and went on as if nothing had happened. Torres was now over half a lap in front and the race was nearing its end. Mercer was just coming into third place when the blue car moved away at tremendous speed. There were gasps of surprise from the crowd as the unknown driver drew closer and closer to Torres and finally sped past him in the last lap to win the race.