

## Teaching Précis-Writing: Objectives and Methodology

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# TEACHING PRÉCIS-WRITING : OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

At Concordia University a 6-credit course entitled "*Contraction de textes français et anglais*" is offered as a compulsory component of the 30-credit graduate Diploma in Writing/Translation. This course is divided into two parts : one in which the working language is English and the other in which the working language is French. While students work only toward their dominant language in other practical courses in the programme, they are required to take both parts of the "*Contraction de textes*" or Précis-writing course<sup>1</sup>.

It is useful to make a few remarks about the *clientèle* in our Diploma Programme. Enrolment is limited to the equivalent of approximately 10 students a year. Students are carefully selected on the basis of a written examination which includes translation and writing samples in the applicant's working language. Applicants must have an undergraduate degree in any discipline other than translation. They generally have some work experience, often in fields requiring the use of both English and French. Students I have worked with have been mature and have also had a variety of qualifications beyond the B.A., such as a Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language, a Master of Social Work degree, and even a Ph.D. in Biochemistry. About half of the students consider English to be their dominant language ; of the remaining students, many have an excellent command of English because they have attended English schools or worked in English. In short, the maturity, professional experience, educational background and linguistic skills of the students made it possible to maintain a fairly high level of instruction.

## 2. DEFINITION

The practice known in French as "*contraction de textes*" is referred to in English as "précis-writing". The immediate source of the term "précis", meaning a summary, abstract or condensation, is the French adjective *précis* signifying *precise*. As pointed out in an early study of précis-writing, the word actually derives from the Latin verb *prae-cidere*, to cut off (*prae*, before + *cidere*, to cut<sup>2</sup>). The definition of the term "précis" provided by *Webster's Third International Dictionary* reflects its double etymology : "a concise epitome or abstract (as of a book or a case) : a brief summary of essential points, statements of facts".

Précis-writing can then be defined as an exercise involving the production of a written summary of a longer passage ; the précis is generally one-third the length of the original text.

## 3. OBJECTIVES

Students in professional programmes are concerned, and rightly so, about how the skills acquired in a particular course are related to subsequent professional activities. One of the objectives in any translation course must therefore be to provide skills that are applicable to the job market and, in addition, to explain how.

A course in précis-writing is both directly and indirectly related to a career in translation. Translators are occasionally called upon to serve as précis-writers as such.

A notable example of this is the position offered by the United Nations for Translators/Précis-writers, whose duties are *i)* "to translate [...] documents relating to various aspects of United Nations activities" and *ii)* "to attend meetings of the United Nations bodies and draft summary records of their proceedings"<sup>3</sup>.

A recent book on abstracting (the preparation of abstracts of scientific or scholarly papers for access publications or for computer-based information-retrieval systems) emphasizes how closely linked the skills of abstractor and translator are. It indicates a need for professional abstractors with translating skills<sup>4</sup>.

Even in jobs where translators are not specifically required to write précis, they may occasionally be asked to do a summary translation of a longer work that cannot be translated or that the client may decide to have translated in its entirety only after learning what the basic thrust of the work is.

A course in précis-writing also has more general applications in that it helps to develop a number of skills that are central to translation and writing. In order to summarize a text effectively a sound understanding of the text is necessary. This involves several levels of comprehension : understanding the linguistic units and understanding the meaning, including all nuances or shades of meaning, as we shall see later. The reader not only understands ; he or she also analyses and ultimately evaluates ideas to distinguish those that are essential from those that are redundant or elaborative. This highly complex process of reading, understanding and analysing a text strengthens the student's analytical abilities, powers of discrimination and judgment : qualities which are fundamental to the translation process and related activities.

Précis-writing also provides an opportunity for honing one's writing skills. Once the work of analysing and organizing the material has been completed, the material must be compressed and recast in the most clear and concise manner possible. The requirement of brevity forces the writer to weigh each word or phrase carefully. This affords invaluable training in effective and accurate writing.

Like most practical courses in a translation programme, this kind of course enables the student to improve his or her knowledge of the working language. No matter how good one's command of a language is, there is always room for improvement, particularly if one is exposed to the deleterious effects of a bilingual environment. Vocabulary can be increased, the fine points of grammar elucidated and fluency and accuracy of diction and syntax reinforced.

An additional benefit of the course became apparent to me quite by chance. The 30-credit (or one year) Diploma Programme does not leave room for courses in translation theory. Unlike undergraduate students who frequently complain that theory courses are dry or irrelevant, this particular group expressed a wish to have this gap filled. I obligingly reviewed the current trends in translation theory, supplementing my cursory lecture with mimeographed readings. Together with my students I have realized that the précis-writing process, in which essential *ideas* must be grasped and *recast* (in the same language or in a second language), while remaining faithful to the original tone and intent, leads to a better comprehension of translation theory and, in particular, the school of thought referred to as the "*théorie du sens*"<sup>5</sup>. It is more apparent in a précis-writing course than in an actual translation course that a translator must discriminate between "*signification*" and "*sens*"<sup>6</sup>, and go beyond "code-switching" in order to "communicate the *meaning*" of the message<sup>7</sup>.

In addition to preparing students for the specific job of translator/writer, précis-writing is an exercise with broader applications. In the first place, it can teach students the art of effective note-taking for use in the classroom and in the library. This ability can be transferred to any activity in which intelligent reading and an efficient interpreta-

tion of the printed page are required. Précis-writing constitutes a form of mental training that is valuable not only to translators, but also to other professionals such as reporters, lawyers, administrators. This is not to say that we teach précis-writing as a "service course" for students in other disciplines. What we aim to do is to train students who are well-rounded and versatile, and hence better suited to a changing and unstable job market.

#### 4. COURSE OUTLINE AND FOCUS

The course began with a definition of précis-writing, in its usual form (the summary in English of longer texts written originally in English) and its bilingual variation (the summary in English of texts written in French). Objectives were stated and a brief introduction to the various theories of translation was given.

Methodology was an important part of the introductory lecture. A step-by-step approach was presented : reading the original text, identifying the main points, organizing the material, drafting the summary and polishing the final précis. This methodology will be discussed in greater detail below.

Students were usually given one assignment a week. During the first half of the semester they worked on the unilingual précis ; the second half focussed on the bilingual précis. Towards the end of the semester students were asked to write a summary of an English speech read aloud to them. This provided a brief introduction to the techniques of note-taking for purposes of interpreting.

Classes consisted of a discussion of assignments. General and individual difficulties were explained. Rather than present my own précis as a "*corrigé*", I tended to analyse the original text using the French "*explication de texte*" technique. I would examine the text paragraph by paragraph, and then present what I considered to be the structure of the text. I would clear up any ambiguities and then highlight the elements to be retained and those which could more easily be omitted.

As indicated in point 3 above, I took every opportunity to improve the quality of written English. Fine points of English grammar, such as the correct use of "which" and "that" were explained. We would use examples from real texts to discuss the merits of resorting to split infinitives in certain cases instead of blindly condemning and avoiding them. Students were made aware of the increasing number of gallicisms that occur in a bilingual milieu : for example, "*to present oneself* in person to the accounts office" or "*to accept to take the minutes*". Some time was taken to clear up confusion over pairs of words such as "continual/continuous" or "disinterested/uninterested", and to alert students to such troublesome words as : "due to", "hopefully", "different than", etc.

When dealing with bilingual précis-writing, certain terminological problems arose. Once again the shorter Diploma Programme does not leave enough room for courses in terminology. Students, therefore, had to be taught how to recognize technical or specialized terms and how to go about finding appropriate equivalents through a judicious use of dictionaries, glossaries or other reference material and, in some cases, resource persons such as professional terminologists or experts in the particular field they are dealing with.

After practical work consisting in writing précis of increasingly difficult texts, the course concluded with a recapitulation of the various techniques acquired, together with a fresh look at translation theory as illustrated by the practical exercises performed throughout the courses.

#### 5. CHOICE OF TEXTS

Texts were approximately 1 000 words in length, to be reduced to about 300 words. An effort was made to find complete texts, rather than excerpts from longer

pieces or works. One of the problems, however, is that texts of a suitable length are found primarily in newspapers or magazines. Articles of this kind are generally similar in style and — even more problematic — tend to be succinct and overly compressed to begin with. This makes the task of summarizing more arduous. In some cases, therefore, I did use excerpts, as long as they were passages in which a specific theme or argument was developed in a relatively logical and coherent manner.

The texts chosen fell into three very broad categories : (1) general : texts that are accessible to the average reader and which require no specialized knowledge of specific concepts or terminology ; (2) technical : texts dealing with scientific or specialized subjects in which the concepts are not immediately understandable to the layman (these texts require some research in order to gain familiarity with the subject matter and choose appropriate terminology) ; (3) political : texts ranging from reports, proceedings of meetings, to political commentary (these texts tend to defend a particular point of view and hence have a "vocative" function).

In choosing texts, attention was given to varying not only the subject matter, but also the form and the style in which it was presented. An example of a general text in journalistic style was an article entitled "Taking a Bath" from the *New York Times Magazine*<sup>8</sup>. The article was an interesting one because of its tone, level and target audience. While under the rubric "Beauty", it differed from the kind of beauty article one might find in a traditional "women's magazine" such as *Ladies Home Journal* or *Châtelaine*. Because the article appeared in the *New York Times*, which has a substantial proportion of male readers and which is aimed at a fairly intellectual readership, it contained a good dose of history, medical opinion, and so on, to give it greater credibility and wider appeal.

Another text in the general category was taken from the introductory chapter of Doris Lessing's novel *Martha Quest*<sup>9</sup>. The passage dealt with adolescent misery, treated in a literary style. Very little actual *information* was contained in the text, as opposed to the article on bathing. Instead, the student was given the task of capturing the atmosphere of youthful agony and rebellion and summarizing it in a manner that reflected the tone of the original.

Technical texts were taken from magazines, wherever possible, rather than from highly specialized journals, in order to keep to a minimum the research required of the student. It was considered important to introduce students to the *idea* of carrying out the research necessary to understand and summarize a text effectively, without making this process the main object of the exercise.

An article on brain cancer was taken from *Science Dimension*<sup>10</sup>. It contained a considerable amount of technical information related to brain tumours and a recently-discovered form of radiation therapy, which could not fail to interest students despite the difficulty of the text. Another technical text used, for a bilingual précis exercise this time, was taken from *Circuit*<sup>11</sup>. The article discussed the use of computers in translation ; it contained a number of specialized terms related to word-processing, as well as some complex concepts pertaining to the translation process. While technical, this material was presumably familiar ground to translation students. In contrast to the above-mentioned piece on the most lethal form of cancer, the *Circuit* article was written in a light, entertaining and often humorous vein.

A third example of specialized texts used in the course was a book review of a work entitled *Du travail et de l'amour*, a study carried out by a team of women researchers : a sociologist, an economist and two historians<sup>12</sup>. The subject matter of the work being reviewed was specialized. Some of this came through as the reviewer outlined the content of the book. At the same time, it must be remembered that the book review is a

specific journalistic *genre*, which takes certain points from another work and highlights them in a way that can be either negative or positive. Book reviews, particularly of long works such as this one, are always a type of *précis* in themselves. And yet it is useful to see how it can be further condensed by omitting quotations, reducing the number of examples, and so on.

An article published in a community newspaper at the time of the Quebec provincial election campaign provided a useful exercise in the "political" category<sup>13</sup>. A *Parti québécois* candidate in a predominantly Liberal riding attacked Liberal Party policies in a colourful style that made frequent use of combat imagery : "*instruments de torture mentale*", "*offensives savamment orchestrées*". This set a definite tone which would have to be retained in the *précis*. In addition to rhetorical devices used for political purposes, the text contained some errors that required guesswork or deciphering, just as in the "real" world of translation where texts are often incomplete or imperfect.

A political text written in quite a different style was taken from the final report of the Task Force on Canadian Unity (Pépin-Robarts Commission)<sup>14</sup>. It differed from most articles on political topics in that it was neither analytical nor satirical ; nor was its primary objective to criticize or demolish a specific individual, ideal or party. It was generally well-written : not only informative, but also idealistic and even lyrical at times.

Another piece of writing that could be considered political was an excerpt from a paper given at a conference on women's studies<sup>15</sup>. The paper dealt with adult education as related to women and their position in society. It posed a number of problems because of its style first of all. As a paper that was meant to be delivered orally and subsequently published in the conference proceedings, it fluctuated between a conversational tone and the more formal style of a learned publication. Because of the subject matter, which was somewhere at the crossroads of education, sociology and political science, it contained complex concepts as well as a certain jargon. Finally, because of the nature of the conference itself, which examined women's issues and at the same time advocated social action, the text had its own rhetoric and could therefore be classified as "political".

Thus students were offered a broad range of issues, concepts, terminologies, all conveyed in a variety of forms, from book review to novel. Texts were chosen to illustrate the many ways in which the written word can be used and directed at different types of readers for a multitude of purposes.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

*Précis* writing involves two major steps : (1) understanding the text and (2) composing the *précis*<sup>16</sup>.

### 6.1 Understanding the Text

Becoming familiar with a new text and understanding its meaning and full implications is a highly complex process. It can be broken down as follows :

#### *Reading and Comprehension*

The first reading will give a general idea of what the text is about. Depending on the degree of difficulty of the text — if there is specific terminology or if the text is in the reader's second language, for example, — there may be some research at this level. That is, the reader will attempt to find out what individual words mean and then to gain an overall, albeit superficial, understanding of the text. In this way the reader will ascertain what the text is about and what is being said.

### *Analysis*

At this stage the content of the text is reexamined in its particular context. First, it is important to find out whether the text is part of a longer piece of writing and, if so, what type of work it is. Is the text taken from a newspaper, magazine or journal ? If so, what is the nature of the publication ? Who are its readers ? These were important considerations for most of the texts used in my course : for the excerpt from *Martha Quest*, which is one novel in a sequence of novels dealing with one woman's growth and development, and even more relevant in the case of "Brain Tumours" which appeared in *Science Dimension*, rather than the more specialized *New England Journal of Medicine*. It is important to try to find out what the purpose of the original text is : why has the author written it and what is he trying to achieve ?

In addition to learning about the context and purpose of the text, the reader must attempt to analyse its form and style. Is the passage descriptive, analytical, literary ? Is it written in the first person or the third person ? The style can of course be neutral, the author wishing merely to convey certain facts. In many cases, however, the author's objectives will influence the way in which the material is presented and the ideas formulated. The style may be satirical, vehemently critical, lyrical, and so on.

Having weighed these factors, the reader is now in a position to deduce what the author really means and to enunciate not only the important ideas but also the more subtle nuances or overtones.

### *Evaluation of Ideas*

This phase entails an evaluation of ideas. It is important not only to enumerate the various points that the author makes in the text, but to establish the relationships between these ideas. It is helpful to use Barthe's categories to distinguish between what he calls "*noyaux*" : main points adding new information, and "*catalyses*" : secondary ideas carrying redundant information which may be elaborative or illustrative of the main points<sup>17</sup>. Once the reader has distinguished the primary ideas from the secondary ones, he or she must then decide which of the latter group are useful in getting the message across. In some cases, one "*catalyse*" may be retained to illustrate the main idea, whereas in another type of text the idea could stand alone without illustration.

### *Organization of Material*

A plan must now be drawn up. A useful preliminary step is to note, paragraph by paragraph, the various points made. Then each point can be put into one of the above categories. It is useful to determine what the basic structure of the text is. Depending on the type of text, the material may be organized according to a thesis — antithesis — synthesis (French "*dissertation*") approach ; ideas may be developed chronologically or presented in descending order of importance. The material should then be organized or reorganized into a coherent plan reflecting the progression of the main ideas, in keeping with the aims of the author and the tone of the original.

## **6.2 Composition of the Précis**

### *Drafting the Précis*

The précis must now be written. It should be emphasized that this is to be an original composition. The writer must follow the plan that has evolved out of step one and summarize what he has deemed essential to the original text. It is important that the précis be in the writer's own words and not, as Pamela Russell says, a "pasted-together collage of sections of the source text"<sup>18</sup>.

### *Bilingual Précis*

Before the bilingual précis can be drafted, there is an intermediate step consisting of terminological research. The key terms should be underlined in the source text. Appropriate equivalents should be found and, if necessary, a short list or glossary compiled, to help the writer formulate his or her ideas. Once again, however, just as the précis is not made up of fragments of the original, the bilingual précis must not be a translation of phrases lifted from the original. The ideas found in the source text must be recast in the target language to produce an original piece of writing.

### *Compression*

Words in the draft will then be counted. More often than not the précis will be longer than one-third the original and further compression will be required. At this stage, it is a question of achieving economy of style, as the key ideas will have been selected and superfluous ones omitted previously.

Economy may be achieved in a variety of ways. To begin with, illustrations and unnecessary figures of speech are usually omitted. Quotations, wordy fillers in the original texts, may be reduced to a few, succinct words in indirect speech as in :

Lynn Payer, the author of a book comparing European and North American medicine to be published by [...] cites a prominent French rheumatologist, Dr. Deslous-Paoli. As to why spa cures work he says : "We really don't know [...]"<sup>19</sup>.

This can be simply stated as "Experts are unable to explain why spas work...".

Concision may also be achieved by elimination of redundant or wordy expressions. Some of these are common : "*at this point in time*", for example, which can easily be changed to "*now*". A less common but equally serious pleonasm occurred in the bathing text as well : "The relaxing effects of water have also been used to relieve the *contractions* of early *labour* in *pregnant women*"<sup>20</sup>. Surely the idea would have been just as clear if the term "pregnant women" has been omitted.

An effective choice of words will enable the précis writer to replace a number of words with a single word : "War seemed *about to break out any moment*" can be changed to "War seemed *imminent*".

A skillful use of sentence construction will also result in compression. Two sentences can be combined to form a single sentence, by turning one of them into a subordinate clause, a participial phrase, or a phrase containing an infinitive, for example.

### *Revision*

Once the précis has been shortened to the desired length, it must be reread and checked for accuracy to ensure that the message has been conveyed and the tone maintained. The student should check to see that nothing important has been omitted and also that nothing has been added that might distort the meaning of the original.

The final step in précis-writing, as in all forms of writing and translation, is to polish the piece of work, in order to avoid errors of spelling, grammar, punctuation and to ensure clarity and elegance of style.

## 7. TYPES OF ERRORS

### 7.1 Understanding the Source Text

Few errors were the direct result of an insufficient knowledge of the source language as such. Students experienced some difficulty, however, when the text was written



in a style that was not straight-forward. This was true of the Michèle Jean text, for example, in which difficult jargon was combined with a ponderous style :

*Je suis de plus en plus convaincue que le savoir et le pouvoir pourraient être partagés autrement et que nos paradigmes, aussi bien socio-culturels qu'éducatifs, pourraient s'articuler différemment si nous étions cohérents avec les discours sur la démocratisation de l'enseignement [...] que nous tenons depuis près de quinze ans dans nos organismes internationaux et dans la plupart des pays que nous habitons<sup>21</sup>.*

In other texts of a more technical nature errors arose because students failed to understand the concepts and attempted to do the job by merely shuffling around linguistic units.

Students were not always certain about which ideas to leave in and which points to omit. This was generally because they had failed to comprehend the underlying structure or had not drawn up a plan that accurately reflected the original text.

## 7.2 Writing the Précis

A common problem was distortion of the message, sometimes through omission of certain key points, but often through the addition of personal emphasis or comments.

Terminology led to more errors than it ought to have. When doing bilingual précis students often failed to distinguish words from *terms* that required equivalents specific to one particular context.

Students frequently failed to choose words or expressions that would accurately and concisely convey the intended meaning. They also had some difficulty constructing succinct and parallel sentences.

Finally, there were the inevitable spelling mistakes, many of them arising from confusion with French spellings : *independance* for *independence* ; *personnal* for *personal*, and so on.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Students made considerable progress and acquired a reasonable proficiency in English précis-writing by the end of term. For the most part they enjoyed the exercise in itself, as well as the opportunity the course provided to improve their command of English.

Many claims have been made about the value of précis-writing. Its advocates over the years have held that it increases concentration, develops powers of discrimination, and leads to mastery of the English language. While these claims have at times been too extravagant<sup>22</sup>, it is clear that précis-writing is an important component of programmes in writing and translation. Furthermore, at a time when fewer people are able to write effectively and yet more and more need access to information, there will be an increasing demand for professionals with the ability to digest information and present it clearly and concisely.

## Notes

1. In writing this article I have drawn on my personal experience of teaching the English half of this course for the past two years.
2. Grace Elizabeth Jencke (1935) : *A Study of Précis Writing as a Composition Technique*, New York, Columbia University, p. 7.
3. United Nations Announcement of Post, document n° RECR. 1.2/B (83) E.
4. Edward T. Crammins (1982) : *The Art of Abstracting*, Philadelphia, ISI Press, pp. 11-13 and p. 105, in particular.
5. This theory is associated with a group of researchers working at the *École supérieure d'interprètes et de traducteurs* (ÉSIT) in Paris, and has been applied to the didactics of translation by Jean Delisle (1981) :

- « De la théorie à la pédagogie : réflexions méthodologiques », in *l'Enseignement de l'interprétation et de la traduction*, éd. Jean Delisle, Ottawa, Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa.
6. Jean Delisle (1980) : *l'Analyse du discours comme méthode de traduction*, Ottawa Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, p. 59.
  7. Danica Seleskovitch (1976) : "Interpretation. A Psychological Approach to Translation", in *Translation : Applications and Research*, Richard W. Brislin (edit.), New York, Gardner Press, pp. 92-95.
  8. Deborah Blumenthal (1984) : "Taking a Bath", *New York Times Magazine*, November 25, pp. 114-115.
  9. Doris Lessing (1977) : *Martha Quest*, London, Panther Books, pp. 13-14.
  10. Bill Atkinson (1983) : "New Tumour Therapy at U.B.C.", *Science Dimension* 4. *Science Dimension*, which is also published in French as *Dimension Science*, by the National Research Council, is an excellent source of scientific material that is well written, amply illustrated and usually accessible to students of translation. Subscriptions are free.
  11. Agnès Guitard et Pierre Marchand (1983) : "Du langage-machine aux machines linguistiques : l'ordinateur à la parole", *Circuit*, juin, pp. 2-3.
  12. Renée Rowan (1985) : "Le problème travail domestique", *le Devoir*, 25 février, p. 4.
  13. Jean-Guy Mailloux (1985) : "Une lettre aux résidents du comté N.D.G.", *The Monitor*, October 29, p. 4.
  14. The Task Force on Canadian Unity, "Canada and the Search for Unity", in *A Future Together : Observations and Recommendations*, Ottawa, Minister of Supply and Services, pp. 35-36.
  15. Michèle Jean (1982) : "Deux défis de l'enseignement aux femmes : intégrer le féminin dans les savoirs constitués et développer l'apprentissage innovateur chez les femmes", paper presented at the International Conference on Research and Teaching Related to Women, Concordia University, Montreal.
  16. Pamela Russell (1981) : "The Importance of Précis-Writing in a Translator Training Programme", in *l'Enseignement de l'interprétation et de la traduction*, éd. Jean Delisle, Ottawa, Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa. The systematic approach to précis-writing presented in this article has been extremely useful to me.
  17. Roland Barthes (1977) : "L'analyse structurale du récit", in *Poétique du récit*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil. This approach is developed by André Petroff (1975) : "Méthodologie de la contraction de textes", *Langue française*, n° 26, mai, pp. 45-46.
  18. Russell, p. 242.
  19. "Taking a Bath", p. 115.
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
  21. "Deux défis de l'enseignement relatif aux femmes".
  22. Jencke, *op. cit.*. The purpose of this study was to verify through experiments the validity of such claims. She concludes that while clearly a valuable aid in the classroom, précis-writing is no more beneficial than an equivalent amount of free composition.

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