**Rhetorical Precis**

In 1988, Margaret Woodworth reported on a reading/writing method that demonstrated significant success with her students at various levels, particularly in their reading comprehension and preparation for using source materials in their own academic writing. That method, which Woodworth calls "the rhetorical précis," will be a central part of our writing this semester as we try to improve our critical reading skills. I reprint the basic outline here from Woodworth's article:

**Sentence #1 will include the following:**

* Name of the author and (if possible: a phrase describing the credentials of the author)
* The type (e.g. essay, lecture, research paper, etc.) and title of the work
* The date, if available (inserted in parentheses)
* A rhetorically accurate verb (such as “assert,” “argue,” “suggest,” “imply,” “claim,” etc.) that describes what the author is doing in the text
* A THAT clause in which you state the major assertion (thesis statement) of the author’s text

**Sentence #2 will include the following:**

* An explanation of how the author develops and/or supports the thesis (such as by comparing and contrasting, narrating, illustrating, defining, etc.)
* Present your explanation in the same chronological order that the items of support are presented by the author in the text

**Sentence #3 will include the following:**

* A statement of the author’s purpose
* Followed by an IN ORDER TO clause in which you explain what the author wants the audience to do or feel as a result of reading the work

**Sentence #4 will include the following:**

* A description of the intended audience
* A description of the tone the author uses

**The following is an example of the rhetorical précis method applied to the essay “The Ugly Truth About Beauty” by Dave Barry**

**Sentence #1:**

In “The Ugly Truth about Beauty” (1998), Dave Barry argues that “…women generally do

not think of their looks in the same way that men do” (4).

**Sentence #2:**

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).

**Sentence #3:**

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.

**Sentence #4:**

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 by 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).

**Put it all together and it looks pretty darn smart:**

In the editorial “The Ugly Truth about Beauty” (1998), Dave Barry argues that “…women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do” (4). 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). 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. 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 by 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).

Barry, Dave. “The Ugly Truth about Beauty.” *Mirror on America: Short Essays and*

*Images from Popular Culture*. 2nd ed. Eds. Joan T. Mims and Elizabeth N. Nollen.

NY: Bedford, 2003. 109-12.

Notice that the example follows her pattern exactly. The first sentence identifies the author (Barry), the genre (editorial), the title and date, and uses an active verb (argues) and the relative pronoun that to explain what exactly Barry argues. The second sentence explains the first by offering chronological examples from Barry’s editorial using an appropriate POWER verb, while the third sentence suggests the author's purpose and WHY (in order to) he has set out that purpose (or seems to have set out that purpose -- not all essays are explicit about this information and readers have to put the pieces together). The final sentence identifies the primary audience of the essay (men and women) and suggests how this audience is brought into/connected to the essay's purpose.

The rhetorical précis is useful for AP Language students to master as they are asked to read and analyze passages quickly in the AP test setting. This method makes for an excellent annotation of such texts, and I encourage you to use it for other classes. This method is also very useful when students are assigned to read a great deal as in college classes because it is a very structured annotation technique. Then, reviewing information involves reading a few short paragraphs, rather than trying to skim 20 - 30 page articles the night before tests. Such précis are also useful as you write longer, researched papers because you may have read so many sources that you've forgotten them all; with the précis, you can organize your thoughts by sources AND because you wrote these (mostly) in your own words, you don't have to worry about plagiarism. Although these writings are short, they are quite challenging to do well.