

**RUSSEL, Pamela R. (1989): *How to Write a Précis*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, xiii + 76 p.**

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■ RUSSELL, Pamela R. (1989): *How to Write a Précis*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, xiii + 76 p.

“The précis,” Pamela Russell points out (p. ix), “is an exercise that is admirably suited to developing language skills.” The manual she has written is based on material she developed during her years spent teaching English writing techniques at the School of Translators and Interpreters of the University of Ottawa. The book includes a theoretical background, step-by-step instructions and general guidelines, as well as exercises and samples of actual précis. Divided into two parts, the first presenting theory and methods and the second presenting a series of practical exercises, the book contains material aimed at a broader audience than translators alone. It contains chapters on précis, abstracts, abridgements, summary records of proceedings, a history of summary-writing, the use of the précis in testing, the way it functions in translator-training, evaluating précis, an outline of a writing skills programme, a bibliography, and forty exercises. We will limit our remarks to the use of précis-writing in translator-training.

The author observes that “many people are fluent in two or more languages, yet are unable to write well” (p. 9). It was this realization that led her to adopt précis-writing as a tool for training translators, as she was conscious of the high priority attached to writing well and realized the need for translators to reformulate texts while preserving their meaning. She defines the précis as a “written summary... that accurately reflects the content of an original passage” (p. xiii). But in addition to learning to write well, it is necessary to teach future translators how to understand written material and how to reformulate ideas succinctly. More specifically, they must learn to convey the primary ideas in a text faithfully, while leaving out the ideas of secondary importance, as well as the details; all this while using terms different from those of the original. Objectivity is a must and stress is laid on the ability to use words effectively.

In addition to teaching précis-writing, largely from the pedagogical standpoint, the author deals with two types of summaries frequently written by translators, the abstract and the summary record of proceedings. Abstracts are divided into the descriptive abstract, which describes the contents of a text and enables the reader to decide whether it is worthwhile reading the original, and the informative abstract, which summarizes the text’s purpose and approach, as well as its observations and conclusions. Abstracts are frequently produced in a number of languages, more often than not in the scientific field.

The summary record of proceedings deals with spoken material. The United Nations uses summary records to record the work done by its various agencies and these records are produced in all the official UN languages. Writing them constitutes a large part of the duties of a UN translator and the examinations administered to applicants for a post as a UN translator always include a summary in one or more languages of a speech delivered in another.

The forty exercises which accompany the manual are designed to develop skills in comprehension, analysis, brevity, paraphrasing, précis-writing, summarizing spoken texts, interlingual précis-writing, popularization-summaries and abstracting. The material presented is taken from a variety of sources: *Time*, *Maclean's*, *Science Dimension* (published by Canada's National Research Council), *Land* (published by Environment Canada), *L'Express*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *The Financial Post*, as well as various journals and anthologies published by the University of Ottawa Press.

On the whole, the manual is well-organized and well-presented. It should prove valuable to anyone interested in the training of translators, or for that matter, to anyone who seeks to develop in students the ability to comprehend ideas, to organize them, and to develop good writing skills in presenting them.

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