

## *Help...I've Been Asked to Synthesize!*

Writing a strong researched paper requires the ability to synthesize—or combine elements of several sources—to help you make a point. The purpose of the Multiple Source Essay is to give students the chance to practice this process of "synthesis". In English 1120, synthesis is not magic, but is a tool for drawing together particular themes or traits that you observe in various texts and reorganizing the material according to themes or traits put forth by you and driven by your thesis.

If you are breathing, you are synthesizing. It's simply a matter of making connections or putting things together. We synthesize information naturally to help others see the connections between things. For example, when you report to a friend the things that several other friends have said about a song or movie, you are engaging in synthesis. However, synthesizing is much more than simply reporting. Synthesis is related to, but not the same as, classification, division, or comparison and contrast. Instead of merely attending to different categories and trying to find some sort of similarity or difference, synthesizing is a matter of pulling various sources together into some kind of harmony. It is the ability to combine clearly and coherently the ideas of more than one source with your own. For example, you have probably already, early in your college years, stored up a mental databank of the various things you have heard about particular professors. If your databank contains several negative comments, you might synthesize that information and use it to help you decide not to take a class from a particular instructor.

Although at its most basic level a synthesis involves combining two or more theses/ideas, synthesis writing is more difficult than it might first appear because this combining must be done in a meaningful way, and the final product must be thesis driven.

So you might be asking yourself, "What the heck am I supposed to do?" The key to writing any researched essay is to read well, to understand the main idea and developmental structure of the source articles, and to identify the points of contact between the various sources and your own argument. This means seeing how they agree, disagree, reinforce, subvert, explain and contradict one another in the context of your thesis. So, in a nutshell, synthesizing finds and explicates links between materials for the purpose of constructing a new thesis (syn-thesis) or theory.

There are several things students should keep in mind while beginning to attempt writing essays that use synthesis.

### **Here are a few things it is usually best to AVOID:**

1. AVOID constructing the body of your paper out of a series of summaries.

This is the most common error that writers fall into when first attempting this kind of essay. Since you already know how to write summaries (Remember the Critique?), it is easy to think that a synthesis is just a summary of different sources. It's not; writing a true synthesis is a different, more demanding, and more sophisticated task. Why? Because a mere collection of summaries, while much easier to produce, has one very serious shortcoming. Keep in mind that written sources dealing with the same topic typically include many of the same facts and arguments (usually just phrased differently). So, if you just summarize each source

in turn, you usually end up just presenting the same ideas over and over—whether you realize it or not. It's up to you to digest and rearrange material from your sources. Simply summarizing them puts the emphasis on your sources and not where it belongs—on your thesis. Remember, your sources should provide evidence for YOUR thesis. Use your sources; don't be dominated by them.

2. AVOID bombarding your reader with undifferentiated masses of facts, examples, and quotations.

Most writers do this in an effort to be "objective." But overwhelming your readers with information usually does not convince, but rather confuses them. If you find your paragraphs going on for pages and pages, it's usually a good sign that you have NOT arranged your material for the convenience of your reader. You should organize your data to make it accessible; you should interpret the data to help the reader understand how the sources relate to each other and your thesis.

3. AVOID beginning your paragraphs by presenting quotations or facts from your sources.

That's an example of the cart pulling the horse. It's much easier to start by telling your reader what point YOU want to make. Remember, when writing in general it's usually more effective to start from a general point and move to specifics. One tried and true method is to begin your paragraphs with topic sentences that spell out one of the supporting arguments for your thesis. Then use material borrowed from your sources as evidence to illustrate or elaborate the point made in your topic sentences.

**Here are some things you SHOULD try to do:**

1. Once you've done your research, try to start by carefully formulating your thesis. Know what point you are trying to prove and then make sure the rest of your essay sticks to that point and supports it. This is probably good advice for any kind of essay, but especially important for this kind. Synthesized essays, like the Multiple Source and Researched essays, require that you draw on more source material than you might be used to. Having a well-formulated thesis will keep you and your readers from getting bogged down in competing facts and opinions.
2. Try to write complete sentences stating each of the supporting points you want to use to support your main point—or thesis. Then use these sentences as topic sentences for your paragraphs. This way each paragraph can proceed from the general supporting point of the topic sentence to specific facts, quotes, and paraphrases from your sources (material that gives authority to your own points). You can draw on points from your sources in order to expand, develop, support, and/ or illustrate your main ideas.
3. For specific facts, quotations, and paraphrases, always identify your sources. Introduce quotations by putting the name of the writer you drew the material from into your text whenever possible, preferably before the quoted material. If you are quoting someone, it's always a good idea to tell your reader why he or she should listen to that person. Tell your reader something about the quoted writer to establish him or her as an expert or an authority. Remember, for any borrowed material you use, you will need to be sure to provide citations in the text that will direct your audience to more complete information about your sources on the Works Cited page.

Now that we've got all that down, let's look at a rather good example of synthesis:

In the past, opponents of immigration raised economic, racial, religious, and nationalistic *objections or questions* about large-scale immigration to the United States (Jones 247-305). Today, however, experts tell us that *opposition* to immigration is expressed almost exclusively in economic terms. For example, *Dan Lacy*, a workplace consultant, business journalist, and editor, found that "research of immigration attitudes" shows that the fear that some Americans have of losing their jobs to immigrants is the main *reason for opposition* to immigration today (41). In the same economic vein, *Thomas Muller*, an economist with the Urban Institute, *points out the wide spread concern* among Americans that the new immigrants use welfare and other public-aid programs to such an extent that they are a *"financial burden"* on government and, therefore, a *financial burden* on taxpayers (125-127). With these two reasons expressly conveyed, it is easy to see that most *objections* to immigration now fall under the economic realm.

Notice the "experts tell us" phrase that tells us that the author is combining the ideas of experts about "opposition to immigration" and then giving us examples.

Notice how the italicized portions trace the coherence in the sources expressed by the repeated key words that relate to economic objections or questions.

This is important when there are two different sources; they are made to work together to form a coherent discussion of the idea expressed in the topic sentence through the efforts of a third independent writer. And yes, it is your job to be that third "synthesizing" writer.

### **The Key Features of Synthesis**

- Accurately reports information from the sources using a full arsenal of varying phrases and sentences.
- Organized in such a way that readers (audience) can immediately see where the information from the sources overlap.
- Makes sense of the sources and helps the reader (audience) understand them in greater depth.

Feeling blown away? Relax. Synthesis, just like everything else you've learned, is a process. Remember to put to use your skills of summarizing while keeping in mind everything mentioned above. And, of course, as always, don't hesitate to ask for help.