

SYNTHESIS, *as a conversation*

Synthesizing involves combining ideas and information gleaned from different sources. As a critical reading strategy, synthesizing can help you see how different sources relate to one another - for example, by offering supporting details or opposing arguments.

When *you* synthesize material from different sources, *you* construct a conversation among *your* sources, a conversation in which *you* also participate. Synthesizing contributes most to critical thinking when writers use sources not only to support their ideas but to challenge and extend them as well.

In the following example, the writer uses a variety of sources related to Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail". The synthesis brings the sources together around a central idea. Notice how quotation, paraphrase, and summary are all used to present King's and the other sources' ideas.

Example of *Synthesizing*

When King defends his campaign of nonviolent direct action against the clergymen's criticism that "our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence" (King excerpt, paragraph 3), he is using what Vinit Haksar calls Mohandas Gandhi's "safety-valve argument" ("Civil Disobedience and Non-Cooperation" J 17). According to Haksar, Gandhi gave a "nonthreatening warning of worse things to come" if his demands were not met. King similarly makes clear that advocates of actions more extreme than those he advocates are waiting in the wings: "The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence" (King excerpt, paragraph 5). King identifies this force with Elijah Muhammad, and although he does not name him, King's contemporary readers would have known that he was referring also to Malcolm X who, according to Herbert J. Storing, "urged that [African Americans] take seriously the idea of revolution" ("The Case against Civil Disobedience" 90). In fact, Malcolm X accused King of trying "to keep us under control, to keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent" (*Malcolm X Speaks* 12).

Checklist for *Synthesizing*

To synthesize ideas and information:

1. Find and read a variety of sources on your topic, annotating the passages that give you ideas about the topic.
2. Look for patterns among your sources, possibly supporting or refuting your ideas or those of other sources.
3. Write a paragraph or more synthesizing your sources, using quotation, paraphrase, and summary to present what they say on the topic.

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Adapted by Christina Yaniga from Rise B. Axelrod and Charles Raymond Cooper's *Reading Critically, Writing Well: A Reader and Guide*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002. 533-34. Print.