

SYNTHESES

A synthesis is a short essay which brings two or more sources (or perspectives) into conversation with each other.

A synthesis begins by asking the questions:

+How do two (or more) authors view the same debate or issue?

+On which points do they agree?

+On which points do they disagree?

+If they were having an oral conversation, how would Author X respond to the arguments of Author Y and vice versa?

To some extent, writing a synthesis essay is similar to writing a summary: Both papers require careful reading and accurate reporting.

However, writing a synthesis requires you to read more than one source, as well as identify the related ideas. Then, you must explain how those ideas are related.

Sometimes several sources on the same topic will discuss very different points yet reach the same conclusion, and your synthesis will need to reflect that.

At other times, related sources will discuss the same points but reach quite different conclusions. And sometimes sources will simply repeat ideas you have already read in other sources.

PREPARING A SYNTHESIS

The first step in writing a good synthesis is to identify the ideas discussed by each author or source. You should identify each author's thesis statement (main idea).

The second step in writing a good synthesis is to make a list of each author's supporting ideas. If any examples, statistics, or other types of support seem particularly important, make note of them too.

Once you have listed the major ideas that each author discusses or argues, you need to look for the relationships among those ideas. Sometimes the relationships are easy to find.

EX:

In reading several articles about censorship in newspapers, you may have noticed that most of the articles/essays refer in some way to the First Amendment of the Constitution.

In this case, you would report how the different authors used the First Amendment in their arguments.

Unfortunately, sometimes the relationships among ideas are not as easy to see. If you are having trouble seeing clear relationships among the points you have listed, consider these questions:

- + Do the ideas of one author support the ideas of another author? If so, how?
- + Do the authors who reach the same conclusion use the same ideas in their writing? Or do they use different ideas to reach the same conclusion?
- + Do the authors who disagree discuss similar points, or do they discuss completely different points?
- + Are any of the ideas you have listed actually the same idea in different words?

ORGANIZING A SYNTHESIS

How you organize a synthesis essay will depend largely upon the sources you are using and your answers to the questions listed above.

If you have determined that the authors you wish to synthesize discuss similar points (even if the authors do not agree upon these points), you might use a form of arrangement often referred to as the point-by-point arrangement.

POINT-BY-POINT

In writing a synthesis, you may decide to use a point-by-point arrangement, where you present ideas in the following order:

- +Introduction
- +One point discussed by two or more of the authors
- +Another point discussed by two or more of the authors
- +Another point discussed by two or more of the authors
- +Conclusion

EX:

Consider the following point-by-point example.

Suppose you have read several articles about protecting the fragile environment of Utah's West Desert.

One of the articles was written by a spokesperson for the cattle industry, one by a member of the Sierra Club, one by a professor of biology at the local university, and one by an ATV enthusiast.

Although it is unlikely that all these authors will agree about the best ways to use and/or protect these desert lands, it is possible that they will focus on similar points of concern:

- 1) Impact of land use on indigenous plants and animals;
- 2) Impact of land use on local human populations, including ranchers and recreationalists;
- 3) Impact of land use on future generations, etc.

Organizing your synthesis around these common points helps you show relationships between different arguments and different authors.

Point-by-point arrangement will work if you can identify similar points discussed by different sources.

However, sometimes you will read several articles that do not discuss any similar points, even though they are discussing the same topic. In this case, you may have to organize your synthesis by source rather than by specific points.

SOURCE-BY-SOURCE ARRANGEMENT

In writing a synthesis, you may decide to use the Source-by-Source Arrangement, where you present ideas in the following order:

- +Introduction
- +Summary of the many points of one source
- +Summary of the main points of another source
- +Summary of the main points of another source
- +Discuss how two sources agree or disagree with each other.
- +Conclusion

You may also find that some points overlap from author to author and some that do not. In such cases, you can use an arrangement that is a blend of the forms shown above.