

Synthesizing Sources: Definitions and Guiding Questions

What is Synthesis?

Synthesis writing is a form of analysis related to comparison, contrast, classification, division, and arrangement. On a basic level, synthesis requires the writer to pull together two or more summaries, looking for themes in each text. In synthesis, you search for the links between various materials in order to make your point. Where do sources overlap? In what ideas or methods do they diverge? What is missing from the field of research that should be there? Most advanced academic writing, including literature reviews, relies heavily on synthesis.

Writing a synthesis is like building a quilt. Imagine yourself taking each of your sources, tearing them into their component parts, reassembling the most interesting and important pieces from each into some new and beautiful design, stitching those parts together with your own prominent transitional and analytical thread, filling in the occasional gap with something new, and then discarding all the unnecessary leftover parts. A synthesis isn't simply one summary after another after another; the creative work of a synthesis is in reassembling the sources and presenting them from a new, comprehensive perspective.

Summary: The Building Block of Synthesis

- Identify the thesis or main point(s) of each reading. Make sure that you can articulate these clearly.
- Identify the key ideas used by the author(s) to support these points. Note any theories, methodological approaches, and evidence used in the source.
- Restate the ideas in YOUR OWN words. Try closing your book temporarily while you sketch out the first draft of these ideas. You'll be much less tempted to borrow too much, and you can always check later to make sure that your summary is accurate or to add direct quotations.
- Make it brief. In a short paper, try to summarize the main points in two to three sentences or less. In a long paper, try to limit yourself to a paragraph or two per source.
- Remember that summary is intended *only* to provide background for your analysis of the links and patterns that connect the texts. You only need to summarize the points that are *relevant* to those links and patterns or *essential* to an understanding of the source.
- Figure out how much information your audience needs. A novice audience that is unfamiliar with your topic will need more summary and explanation; an expert audience will need only the crucial points.

Moving from Summary to Synthesis

When you move from writing summaries of your texts to synthesis of them, there are several points you must keep in mind.

- Look for connections and links between your readings in order to create your thesis.

- Write and organize your paper in such a way that your readers understand where the information from the different sources overlap.
- Organize your paper by the themes you find within your sources.
- Your paper should consist of subtopics surrounding the themes and traits you are addressing.
- Your goal is to look for, find, and address gaps in the research and how your own thesis and research will address these gaps.

Guiding Questions for Writing and Revising a Synthesis Paper

Adapted from Drew University's online sources for writers

- Can your readers tell what is being synthesized? (Are sources listed and cited correctly?)
- The first time you mention each source, do you include all necessary introductory information about that source?
- Can your readers tell which source is being discussed at any given moment?
- When reading your synthesis, can your readers clearly identify the major relevant points made in each original text?
- Are there places that are unclear due to missing transitions or omitted materials?
- What is the organizational structure of the literature review? What are the main themes/traits? How are you mapping out the research terrain, and have you made that clear to your readers?
- Have you provided your readers with a clear topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph that emphasizes what theme/trait/idea you will now be exploring in that paragraph?
- Does the structure work? Can your readers follow how you move from one idea to another, and how the themes/traits relate to each other?
- Have you provided your readers with a “blueprint” or “roadmap” at the beginning of your synthesis that will allow them to understand how you have organized the information?