

SYNTHESIS ASSIGNMENT

What Is a Synthesis?

Synthesis is perhaps one of the more common techniques that you can expect to use in college writing. Professors often assign this type of paper so that you can demonstrate your understanding of multiple perspectives on a given issue as well as its context. Synthesis requires that you begin to make connections among ideas, texts, theories, activities, to name just a few of the possible range of options. A synthesis depends on a thoughtful and compelling thesis and entails selectively combining information from several sources into a coherent discussion. Synthesis makes use of both the summarizing and analytical techniques, which you practiced in the Summary and Rhetorical Analysis assignments.

For example, you might be asked in your Harlem Renaissance poetry class to synthesize the poets' use of rhyme and meter in three poems to determine effect on poetic tone and meaning. Or you may be asked in your Environmental Ecology class to synthesize the methodological decisions made by three groups of environmental researchers in three similar studies of toxic waste contamination at landfill sites to make recommendations for future investigations. To complete either of these assignments, you would first need to summarize the main points and then analyze the required components (e.g., rhyme and meter for effect; methodological decisions for future investigations) before you could synthesize, or make connections, among the components.

Purpose of the Assignment

To practice the skills of written synthesis, this assignment asks you to begin to make connections between texts and examine ways in which various texts participate in ongoing academic discussions. You will be identifying, analyzing and then explaining how you surmise that two or more authors in *Conversations* are "talking" to each other about a similar theme or topic. In other words, you will first need to consider what the authors are saying to each other, and second, how your views come to terms with the conversation. Then you will write a paper that connects these perspectives around a meaningful thesis.

This essay differs from the rhetorical analysis assignment in several respects. Your role in the rhetorical analysis was primarily that of a critical reader. The present assignment requires you to interact with the texts at a different level. Your role in the synthesis essay is to participate critically in the discussion. You are not expected to be as knowledgeable or conversant as the writers you select, but you can contribute by exploring their respective approaches. It may be helpful to think of your role as that of a

discussant, and your paper as a conversation about the topic you will choose to address.

How Do I Get Started?

As you plan your synthesis paper, keep in mind classroom discussions on relationships among the various readings you will be using as sources.

When thinking about a topic, consider the following questions:

- What similarities, differences, and/or connections do you see among these writers' audiences, subject matter, points of view, and purposes?
- What main point is each writer trying to make?
- What other issues or topics of debate concern the writers?
- What general ideology or philosophical base, understanding, worldview, or metaphysical commitment grounds the position of each writer?

Select one issue of particular interest to you and think about how various writers engage it. You will need to begin by going through each selection that you will use and marking all the references to your theme. Then you can think about the relationships among those references.

Usually, you will have to infer the relationships, though sometimes you will find that writers explicitly address each other. Your goal is not only to analyze relationships among ideas but to contribute some insights of your own to the discussion.

The following categories should help you understand how the different authorial positions you're dealing with relate to each other.

Similar Opinions: Two writers' agreement with each other's opinions, each one validating what the other said.

Contrasting Opinions: Sometimes writers flat out disagree with each other on a particular point, or one writer illuminates problems with the other writer's view.

Expansion: One writer might elaborate the ideas of another in a variety of ways. For example, one writer might provide additional examples of something that another said; or one writer might agree with another, yet extend the discussion in a slightly different direction; or one might fill in gaps that another neglected to address.

Causal Connections: Sometimes one writer will name causes of a phenomenon mentioned by another or further develop potential (or real) consequences of another writer's position.

In all of these possible relationships, the point is first to recognize when authors are talking about approximately the same topic and then to examine the nuances in the ways they address it.