

Synthesis Writing



Although at its most basic level a synthesis involves combining two or more summaries, synthesis writing is more difficult than it might at first appear because this combining must be done in a meaningful way and the final essay must generally be thesis-driven. In composition courses, “synthesis” commonly refers to writing about printed texts, drawing together particular themes or traits that you observe in those texts and organizing the material from each text according to those themes or traits. Sometimes you may be asked to synthesize your own ideas, theory, or research with those of the texts you have been assigned. In your other college classes you’ll probably find yourself synthesizing information from graphs and tables, pieces of music, and art works as well. The [key](#) to any kind of synthesis is the same.

Synthesis in Every Day Life

Whenever you report to a friend the things several other friends have said about a film or CD you engage in synthesis. People synthesize information naturally to help other see the connections between things they learn; for example, you have probably stored up a mental data bank of the various things you’ve heard about particular professors. If your data bank contains several negative comments, you might synthesize that information and use it to help you decide not to take a class from that particular professor. Synthesis is related to but not the same as classification, division, or comparison and contrast. Instead of attending to categories or finding similarities and differences, synthesizing sources is a matter of pulling them together into some kind of harmony. Synthesis searches for links between materials for the purpose of constructing a thesis or theory.

Synthesis Writing Outside of College

The basic research report (described below as a background synthesis) is very common in the business world. Whether one is proposing to open a new store or expand a product line, the report that must inevitably be written will synthesize information and arrange it by topic rather than by source. Whether you want to present information on child rearing to a new mother, or details about your town to a new resident, you’ll find yourself synthesizing too. And just as in college, the quality and usefulness of your synthesis will depend on your accuracy and organization.

Key Features of a Synthesis

- (1) It accurately reports information from the sources using different phrases and sentences;

- (2) It is organized in such a way that readers can immediately see where the information from the sources overlap;
- (3) It makes sense of the sources and helps the reader understand them in greater depth.

The Background Synthesis

The background synthesis requires that you bring together background information on a topic and organize it by topic rather than by source. Instructors often assign background syntheses at the early stages of the research process, before students have developed a thesis--and they can be helpful to students conducting large research projects even if they are not assigned. In a background synthesis of Internet information that could help prospective students select a college, for example, one paragraph might discuss residential life and synthesize brief descriptions of the kinds of things students might find out about living on campus (cited of course), another might discuss the academic program, again synthesizing information from the web sites of several colleges, while a third might synthesize information about co-curricular activities. The completed paper would be a wonderful introduction to internet college searching. It contains no thesis, but it does have a purpose: to present the information that is out there in a helpful and logical way.

In the process of writing his or her background synthesis, the student explored the sources in a new way and become an expert on the topic. Only when one has reached this degree of expertise is one ready to formulate a thesis. Frequently writers of background synthesis papers develop a thesis before they have finished. In the previous example, the student might notice that no two colleges seem to agree on what constitutes "co-curricular," and decide to research this question in more depth, perhaps examining trends in higher education and offering an argument about what this newest trend seems to reveal.

A Thesis-driven Synthesis

Sometimes there is very little obvious difference between a background synthesis and a thesis-driven synthesis, especially if the paper answers the question "what information must we know in order to understand this topic, and why?" The answer to that question forms the thesis of the resulting paper, but it may not be a particularly controversial thesis. There may be some debate about what background information is required, or about why, but in most cases the papers will still seem more like a report than an argument. The difference will be most visible in the topic sentences to each paragraph because instead of simply introducing the material for the paragraph that will follow, they will also link back to the thesis and assert that this information is essential because...

On the other hand, all research papers are also synthesis papers in that they combine the information you have found in ways that help readers to see that information and the topic in question in a new way. A research paper with a weak thesis (such as: "media images of women help to shape women's sense of how they should look") will organize its findings to show how this is so without having to spend

much time discussing other arguments (in this case, other things that also help to shape women's sense of how they should look). A paper with a strong thesis (such as "the media is the single most important factor in shaping women's sense of how they should look") will spend more time discussing arguments that it rejects (in this case, each paragraph will show how the media is more influential than other factors in that particular aspect of women's sense of how they should look").

A Synthesis of the Literature

In many upper level social sciences classes you may be asked to begin research papers with a synthesis of the sources. This part of the paper which may be one paragraph or several pages depending on the length of the paper--is similar to the [background synthesis](#). Your primary purpose is to show readers that you are familiar with the field and are thus qualified to offer your own opinions. But your larger purpose is to show that in spite of all this wonderful research, no one has addressed the problem in the way that you intend to in your paper. This gives your synthesis a purpose, and even a thesis of sorts.

Because each discipline has specific rules and expectations, you should consult your professor or a guide book for that specific discipline if you are asked to write a review of the literature and aren't sure how to do it.

Preparing to write your Synthesis Essay

Regardless of whether you are synthesizing information from prose sources, from laboratory data, or from tables and graphs, your preparation for the synthesis will very likely involve [comparison](#). It may involve [analysis](#), as well, along with classification, and division as you work on your organization.

Sometimes the wording of your assignment will direct you to what sorts of themes or traits you should look for in your synthesis. At other times, though, you may be assigned two or more sources and told to synthesize them. In such cases you need to formulate your own purpose, and develop your own perspectives and interpretations. A systematic preliminary comparison will help. Begin by summarizing briefly the points, themes, or traits that the texts have in common (you might find [summary-outline notes](#) useful here). Explore different ways to organize the information depending on what you find or what you want to demonstrate ([see above](#)). You might find it helpful to make several different outlines or plans before you decide which to use. As the most important aspect of a synthesis is its organization, you can't spend too long on this aspect of your paper!

Writing The Synthesis Essay

A synthesis essay should be organized so that others can understand the sources and evaluate your comprehension of them and their presentation of specific data, themes, etc. The following format works well:

The introduction (usually one paragraph)

1. Contains a one-sentence statement that sums up the focus of your synthesis.
2. Also introduces the texts to be synthesized:
 - (i) Gives the title of each source (following the citation guidelines of whatever style sheet you are using);
 - (ii) Provides the name of each author;
 - (ii) Sometimes also provides pertinent background information about the authors, about the texts to be summarized, or about the general topic from which the texts are drawn.

The body of a synthesis essay:

This should be organized by theme, point, similarity, or aspect of the topic. Your organization will be determined by the assignment or by the patterns you see in the material you are synthesizing. The organization is the most important part of a synthesis, so try out more than one format.

Be sure that each paragraph:

1. Begins with a sentence or phrase that informs readers of the topic of the paragraph;
2. Includes information from more than one source;
3. Clearly indicates which material comes from which source using lead in phrases and in-text citations. [Beware of plagiarism: Accidental plagiarism most often occurs when students are synthesizing sources and do not indicate where the synthesis ends and their own comments begin or vice versa.]
4. Shows the similarities or differences between the different sources in ways that make the paper as informative as possible;
5. Represents the texts fairly--even if that seems to weaken the paper! Look upon yourself as a synthesizing machine; you are simply repeating what the source says, in fewer words and in your own words. But the fact that you are using your own words does not mean that you are in anyway changing what the source says.

Conclusion.

When you have finished your paper, write a conclusion reminding readers of the most significant themes you have found and the ways they connect to the overall topic. You may also want to suggest further research or comment on things that it was not possible for you to discuss in the paper. If you are writing a background synthesis, in some cases it may be appropriate for you to offer an interpretation of the material or take a position (thesis). Check this option with your instructor before you write the final draft of your paper.

Checking your own writing or that of your peers

Read a peer's synthesis and then answer the questions on the next page. The information provided will help the writer check that his or her paper does what he or she intended (for example, it is not necessarily wrong for a synthesis to include any of the writer's opinions, indeed, in a thesis-driven paper this is essential; however, the reader must be able to identify which opinions originated with the writer of the paper and which came from the sources).

Peer-Review or Self-Review Questions

1. What do you like best about your peer's synthesis? (Why? How might he or she do more of it?);
2. Is it clear what is being synthesized? (i.e.: Did your peer list the source(s), and cite it/them correctly?);
3. Is it always clear which source your peer is talking about at any given moment? (Mark any places where it is not clear);
4. Is the thesis of each original text clear in the synthesis? (Write out what you think each thesis is);
5. If you have read the same sources,
 - a. did you identify the same theses as your peer? (If not, how do they differ?);
 - b. did your peer miss any key points from his or her synthesis? (If so, what are they?);
 - c. did your peer include any of his own opinions in his or her synthesis? (If so, what are they?);
6. Where there any points in the synthesis where you were lost because a transition was missing or material seems to have been omitted? (If so, where and how might it be fixed?);
7. What is the organizational structure of the synthesis essay? (It might help to draw a plan/diagram);

8. Does this structure work? (If not, how might your peer revise it?);
9. How is each paragraph structured? (It might help to draw a plan/diagram);
10. Is this method effective? (If not, how should your peer revise?);
11. Was there a mechanical, grammatical, or spelling error that annoyed you as you read the paper? (If so, how could the author fix it? Did you notice this error occurring more than once?) *Do not comment on every typographical or other error you see. It is a waste of time to carefully edit a paper before it is revised!*
12. What other advice do you have for the author of this paper?

Adapted from material written by Rebecca Moore Howard and Sandra Jamieson.

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Synthesis Essay Example:

Take a look at the Wal-Mart essay on the following pages. It is a synthesis essay based on the Wal-Mart essays from the 6th edition of the WARAC. Read very carefully and take specific notice of how the author uses the sources to support the argument being made. Nowhere in the essay is there any one source essay being regurgitated or blindly repeated. The author is always showing you how to mix and match the information that has been read to support that author's particular view. You probably will disagree with the final conclusion, but you should at least recognize the elements used to build the argument.

- Notice that when the author is using sources that go against the main argument, s/he is careful to use direct quotes to be sure that the original author's voice and words came through.
- Notice that at the end, there were several multiple page citations where long or complex arguments were summarized. There were few of these, however. Most of the citations were for simple paraphrases of individual sentences or ideas, not whole pages or multiple pages.
- Notice the different ways that the internal citation was accomplished, depending on whether or not the source was identified in the preceding sentence or not.
- The strength of the conclusion can be argued, but notice how the idea behind the introduction was reintroduced to bring the argument back full circle.

- Notice how the different sides are given equal time, and neither one is made to look foolish or absolutely wrong.
- Notice how the wording and specific language used to bias the reader to see the evidence in specific ways.
- Notice that the title is at the top of the page, but isn't in all-caps or in quotes.
- Notice that the Works Cited page begins on a new page after the last page of the essay.
- Notice that everything in the essay is double-spaced, including the works cited page.
- Notice that the author sometimes leads into the quotation/citation by identifying the source, but not always. Try to identify why the author did identify the source when s/he did.
- Notice that most, if not all, uses of information from a source is followed up by a specific explanation from the author about what that particular piece of information is supposed to be proving.
- Notice that each page of the essay lists the author's name at the top of the page next to the page number.

Wal-Mart versus Mom and Pop: How Can a Small Store Survive?

I am ashamed. I never realized that I was such a bad person. I have sinned against my community and my fellow townspeople on a regular basis. What is my crime? I shop at Wal-Mart. According to one train of thought, I'm helping destroy Main Street U.S.A. by shopping at a predatory national chain. But am I really?

As of 1994, Wal-Mart had 2,504 stores across the U.S. and was expected to open 125 more that year (Ortega 205). Wal-Mart stores do over \$67 billion dollars in annual sales (Norman 207). A Wal-Mart store in Iowa, after being open for two years and building its base, can generate \$10 million a year in sales. A Wal-Mart store planned for Greenfield, Mass. would have employed 274 people (Anderson 218) or 240 people (Johnston 222), depending on which source you read. Discount stores like Wal-Mart allow small to medium towns with little population growth to hold customers to the local shopping area by cutting down on trips by locals to bigger urban areas with lower prices (Stone 210). With all of these benefits, why would anyone be upset about a Wal-Mart store opening in their town?

The concerns against Wal-Mart all seem to focus around one main concern: Wal-Mart and similar stores have changed American retailing, and the protestors don't like the change. Albert Norman, the best known anti-Wal-Mart advocate, claims that Wal-mart represents "... an unwanted shove into urbanization, with all the negatives that threaten small town folks" (209). This urbanization appears to be connected, in the minds of the anti-Wal-Mart brigade, to "mindless consumerism, paved landscapes and homogenization of community identity" (Ortega 204). In other words, instead of a centrally located downtown shopping area with 30 different stores all locally owned, there are now only a handful of bigger stores located on the edge of town in malls and giant concrete shoeboxes, all of them owned by or franchised from huge out-of-town corporations.

The \$10 million dollars an average store generates annually comes at the expense of \$8.3 million that would have been spent at local stores anyway (Norman 207). That extra \$1.7 million sounds

positive until it's pointed out that every dollar spent at a local business stays in town and circulates 4 or 5 times, while a dollar spent at Wal-Mart goes straight to corporate headquarters (Anderson 218). Thus fewer dollars are in local banks for mortgage or other local loans. The 274 jobs created by a new store would actually only be 8 new jobs when the jobs lost from closed competition is factored in (Anderson 218). In addition, many of these jobs are not equivalent. People who were owners are now managers who must answer to corporate headquarters for their hiring, stocking and other decisions. From this perspective, it would indeed seem that big stores like Wal-Mart are "...organizations from one place going into distant places and strip-mining them culturally and economically" (qtd. in Ortega 206).

The major problem with opposition to Wal-Mart is that it's too late. American culture has changed, and people no longer shop the way they used to. People are more mobile and are no longer limited to shopping at the stores available in a local small town Main Street, regardless of price. Price now matters. People feel it's a matter of principle to drive 40 miles to save seventeen cents on a routine purchase (Anderson 220). If a town does stop Wal-mart from coming in to town, Wal-Mart, or a similar store, will simply locate in another small town in the area, and then instead of being a "Wal-Mart town," the town will become one of the towns suffering a 16 to 46 percent loss of retail sales (Stone 210).

Instead of stonewalling the opening of new Wal-Marts, local businesses and home-town advocates need to adapt to the new retail landscape and figure out how to fit in around the big store, not compete with it (Johnston 222). Since many of the anti-Wal-Mart advocates are aging hippies and counter-culture advocates (Ortega 203), they should be very comfortable with the notion that alternative ways of doing business are the most effective way of surviving after Wal-Mart moves in. James F. Moore, a management consultant, talks about business as being an ecosystem that is undergoing a natural evolution from locally owned businesses to large nationally based businesses. Those who adapt and change will survive; those who cling to the outdated system will become extinct (229-230). Instead of trying to preserve Main Street U.S.A., a system that has become an evolutionary dead-end, anti-Wal-Mart and small town advocates need to determine what areas of consumer demand aren't serviced, or aren't adequately serviced, by the big stores and focus on filling that market niche (Stone 211-212). In this way, downtown can remain a viable source of community identity and offer goods, services or conveniences that the big stores can't or won't offer. Survival in the face of apparent extinction is actually a more effective means of protest against corporate giants than simply being "blindly obstructionist" (qtd. in Norman 209). One way simply complains, while the other actually builds and adds a value to the community.

People who shop at stores like Wal-mart aren't evil or wrong. They aren't contributing to the death of their small-town life. They are simply rewarding Wal-Mart for being the most efficient and effective retailer of certain merchandise. That's called capitalism, and it's supposedly the American way. Basically, the fight against Wal-Mart is a fight which cannot be won because it is a fight against a fundamental shift in how Americans shop and view their responsibilities as consumers and citizens. We don't eat at Joe's Corner Diner or the local Italian eatery anymore; we eat at McDonald's or Pizza Hut. We want conformity. We want to know that the food we eat will taste the same no matter where we eat it. Similarly, there is a feeling of comfort when you walk into a "different" Wal-Mart and it has the same products in the same location as your own

local Wal-Mart. Big merchandisers, with large advertising budgets and distribution centers, can make sure that we all have access to the same products at the same time and the same price. Thus, since they can't meet this need as efficiently as the big retailers, the future of small town or local merchants will be entirely dependent on understanding what the big chains can't or won't supply. The future for small stores lies in becoming an alternative to the big stores, not in trying to compete.

Works Cited

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As the word "synthesis" means, the student needs to formulate his or her views in conjunction with the views of other well-known authorities on the topic. Hence, thorough researches from all available sources like the electronic media, books internet, journals and magazines etc will be of great help to write this paper.

Writing a Synthesis Essay

1. What is a synthesis?

A synthesis is a written discussion incorporating support from several sources of differing views. This type of assignment requires that you examine a variety of sources and identify their relationship to your thesis.

2. Synthesis is used in:

- Analysis papers to examine related theories.
 - For example a comparison between the theories of evolution or who shot JFK.
- Research papers to incorporate multiple sources.
 - For example looking at economic and social effects of proposed legislation.
- Argument papers to compare differing views and support a coherent claim.

- For example, is Turn it in a violation of student's rights? One side may argue that the company steals students' papers while others claim that students agree to have their work archived.
- Business reports to examine differing ideas and blend into a coherent plan.
 - For example, what are some of the plans to improve Toledo's waterfront to attract more visitors and increase business opportunities?

3. Tips for an effective synthesis essay:

- Establish your purpose to shape the way you want to argue and form your thesis. The thesis is the main claim or idea of your essay.
- Select your sources and become familiar with them so that you can discuss them in relationship to your thesis and supporting argument(s). If you simply quote sources without evaluating them then the sources will control your paper and your audience will misinterpret the information.
- Develop an organizational plan. Arrange more than just one source per point; multiple sources will increase your credibility. Look at how sources may agree or disagree with one another and evaluate which source has better logic or more credibility.
- Evaluate or interpret each source, then show the relationship between the sources and your thesis.
- Document each source; note the author and page number as well as listing the source on the Works Cited page to avoid plagiarism. This **MUST** be done if you quote, summarize or paraphrase a source.

4. Strategies for organization:

- Climactic order- arranges the most important/persuasive evidence last since this is what is remembered.
- Problem/solution-establishes the problem in the introduction, then offers a few solutions.
- Comparison and contrast-
 - Summarizes each source and shows their similarities and differences
 - Can move from point-to-point, back and forth between items being compared.
 - Can be set into blocks, where one item is completely discussed before moving on to the next.

5. Analyze the position of each source; you can use these verbs to note the author's tone:

Argumentative:

- affirms
- argues
- confirms
- contends
- denies
- disagrees
- believes
- concedes
- insists
- rejects
- responds
- emphasizes

Research:

- adds
- reveals
- states
- mentions
- finds
- verifies

Emphasis:

- alleges
- warns
- advises
- admits
- complains
- holds
- predicts
- proposes
- acknowledges
- speculates
- suggests

6. Which tense do I use?

- MLA- use present tense: Shakespeare writes...
- APA- use past tense: Dr. Bombay affirmed the value...

7. If you have any questions, contact your instructor, refer to Behrens and Rosen's *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, or contact the Writing Center.