Synthesis: A Paragraph Approach

Did you know?

You actually synthesize all the time! Whenever you combine pieces of information from different sources to create your own point, you are synthesizing. Say you read a positive review of an Italian restaurant. Later, your friend tells you the lasagna she ordered there was awful. Based on both pieces of information, you decide to try the restaurant and order eggplant parmesan instead of lasagna. That’s synthesis!

Synthesis is a reorganization or reshuffling of information. From the Greek *sunthesis*, it literally means “place together.” However, academic synthesis requires more than simply combining multiple sources.

Synthesis: What's Your Goal?

- **Evaluate**
  
  If your assignment is to critically examine a text or advertisement, you may need to break it down into its individual parts. Explain these parts to your audience. Ask yourself: are they effective? Why or why not?

- **Compare**
  
  If your assignment is to compare and contrast two or more sources, you need to find the similarities and differences between them. Ask yourself: what are the strengths and weaknesses of each?

- **Argue**
  
  If your assignment is to argue a point on a certain topic, you need to understand both or all sides of the issue. Ask yourself: how do I address the opposing point(s)? Should I concede a minor point to the opposition, or stick to my main point?

- **Explain**
  
  If your assignment is to explain the cause and effect of a process or situation, you need to examine multiple explanations and/or accounts. Ask yourself: what do these explanations and/or accounts have in common? Are there patterns?

Before you can write a successful synthesis, it is helpful to write a summary of each source you are using. Remember, a summary requires paraphrasing – which requires you to use in-text citations. Draw from your summaries as you synthesize.

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Summary vs. Synthesis Example
You are writing a short essay about search engine optimization (SEO). You are using three main sources:

- Source A is a journal article by Smith that examines the development of the internet search engine and gives a brief overview of current SEO strategies.
- Source B is a Prezi by Doe, Jones, and Brown which gives the timeline of the search engine’s creation, development, and specialization.
- Source C is a magazine article by White that lists tips for optimizing views for any website on the current top five search engines.

Summary Paragraph
There are several relevant sources about SEO. Smith’s article gives an account of the development of search engines. Smith also presents a critique of modern SEO strategies. Doe, Jones, and Brown’s Prezi is a detailed timeline of search engines, from their creation to present. White’s article gives tips for SEO on popular search engines.

Synthesis Paragraph
Although most Americans use internet search engines daily, few are aware of their rich history and individual website’s continual quest for SEO. According to a timeline by Doe, Jones, and Brown, search engines have undergone nearly constant development. One of these developments is SEO, which Smith explains in his article as the natural public response to search engines’ increased popularity. White, however, approaches SEO from a different angle, giving practical advice to website owners about how to achieve SEO. To truly understand the progress of SEO in the context of search engine history, this paper will examine both the theoretical and practical aspects of both search engines and SEO development.

The first paragraph summarizes each source. The second paragraph synthesizes these same sources. To successfully synthesize, you need to find the connections between the different sources and make those connections clear to your audience.

While synthesizing, it is important to ask yourself some questions. You want to make sure you are synthesizing rather than summarizing. Some useful questions to ask are:

- Are the connections between my sources clear in my writing?
- Am I making my own point or restating a source’s point?
- Am I using the most important points from my source or am I focusing on minor details?

Helpful Hint! See these Writing Center handouts for further assistance:
- Annotating Sources
- The Annotated Bibliography
- The Literature Review

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