

Synthesis for Research Writers

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What is Synthesis? Why do it?

Synthesizing sources involves weaving summaries, paraphrases, and quotations from two or more sources alongside your own knowledge and claims. While summaries and paraphrases rephrase a source's main ideas, and quotations reproduce a source's exact language, syntheses strategically combine these techniques with your analysis to drive and support your thesis. Synthesis is thus distinct from "stacking" evidence to support claims; synthesis instead "weaves" evidence together.

To synthesize source material, you must discover, within often seemingly unrelated sources, important connections that tie the sources together. The first step in synthesizing material is to determine how your sources connect (and don't connect) to one another. As you identify connections between one source and another, you will then need to determine and make clear where you stand on the subject as compared to your sources.

In academic contexts, synthesis is valued because it shows readers a more dialogic/conversational relationship across sources, which better represents how the circulation of knowledge actually works. Synthesis demands more critical thinking from writers using sources, and it can lead to more nuanced arguments. Thus, synthesis can strengthen your academic writing abilities.



Tips for synthesizing:

- Find specific moments where texts connect! Avoid trying to compare and contrast major claims, and look instead at specific ideas or passages from one text that seem to comment on specific ideas or passages from another text.
- Be clear about the connections you see between texts! Don't assume that if you put two sentences together readers will be able to figure out the connections between sources. Use examples and small quotes to help when necessary, but always add to those examples/quotes with your explanation of how they connect (does SOURCE 2 support, extend, complicate, or challenge SOURCE 1?). It takes time and space to introduce an idea, introduce and synthesize multiple sources, and then explain and analyze the connections you're drawing and the stance you're taking. Spend the time!
- Introduce and contextualize your sources. Drawing on a bunch of sources can get real messy real fast. You'll want to keep in mind that your audience will not have read the sources you draw on. Make your source-use transparent by:
 1. Summarizing the source. There's no need to include a full summary every time you mention a text. Your first use of each source, however, should involve you naming the author(s), the type of text, the title, and then providing a 1-2 sentence summary of the source's major points, overall argument, and/or purpose. This typically happens prior to you introducing the specific idea or passage you will synthesize.
 2. Citing all paraphrases and quotations that you use. This will help you to more clearly distinguish between your ideas and your sources' ideas.

**(some material for this handout was adapted from
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