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Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

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The two winning entries will receive \$350; second place winners (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due by Monday, January 3, 2022. No exceptions can be made.

Fall 2021 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

~Please type or print clearly. Do **not** staple. Use paper clips only~

Instructor's name Ewan Robinson

Dept & Course # DSOC 1200 Course title: Good for Business? Companies, entrepreneurs, and global development

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Title of Writing Exercises: **Handout: Undertaking synthesis in your literature review**

Instructor's signature Ewan Robinson Date 1/3/2022

Handout: Undertaking synthesis in your literature review

Instructor's description:

I used the following handout as part of a five-week sequence of assignments and activities that led students through the process of conducting research using scholarly social science literature, culminating in an essay that took the form of a mini-literature review. During the first two weeks of this unit, students learned tools and strategies for identifying sources and evaluating their quality and standpoints. They then assembled collections of sources and wrote brief summaries and annotations, with the objective of answering specific research questions. Beginning in week three, students undertook mind-mapping and comparison of their sources and composed preparatory writing that encouraged them to identify relationships and patterns across their sources and to begin to describe these relationships in structured writing.

I gave students the following handout during week 3, when they were drafting a first outline of their literature review and a short paragraph describing two groups of sources they had identified during the previous week. This handout aimed to introduce students to the objectives and features of synthetic writing. I wanted to emphasize that synthesis in many ways resembles the skills students had already built for writing analytically about individual texts. (Prior to the research unit, the second and third essays had asked students to use paraphrasing, quotations, and interpretation to develop and support arguments based on an individual text or a pair of texts.) I explained that the Literature Review Essay was asking them to continue to employ the analysis techniques they had already learned, and that they could adapt these same techniques to communicate relationships, commonalities, and differences among sources.

Alongside this handout, students worked in groups to analyze two example literature reviews that modeled different structures for conducting synthesis at the paragraph and sentence levels. Students created reverse outlines of the model texts and identified specific writing features (transitions, pointing words, comparison words, etc.) used by the authors to narrate the relationship among their sources (i.e. to accomplish the goal of synthesis). The handout below and the model texts served as references for students as they revised their preparatory writing into draft body paragraphs during the following week. Students reported that having a clear explanation and demonstrations of synthesis helped them to make specific recommendations to one another during subsequent peer review.

How is Synthesis different from Summary?

The simplest definition of synthesis is the act of “combining multiple sources or ideas” to generate new meaning. (adapted from the [University of Arizona Global Campus Writing Center \(Links to an external site.\)](#), 2021)

- **Summary** = Using quotes or paraphrasing to describe others’ ideas AND interpreting these ideas in order to support of an argument. An essay focused on summarizing makes an argument about **a single text**.
- **Synthesis** = Using quotes and paraphrasing **of multiple sources** and interpreting them **both individually and collectively**. The essay that synthesizes a group of texts makes an argument about overall trends in this group, or even within a field of discourse.

In her handout on synthesis, Colleen Warwick (BGSU) points out that the word “synthesis” derives from root words that capture exactly these two elements. Synthesis involves linking a group of texts together (“syn”=together) and in order to construct a new meaning or argument (“thesis”) (2011).

Notice the following things about this definition...

To write a synthesis you *must* also write summaries of various sources (including quotes and paraphrasing). Summary and synthesis are closely related and overlapping types of writing.

However, it is crucial that you understand how synthesis goes beyond summary! The most common mistake in undergraduate synthesis essays is that students paste together a series of summaries (quotes, paraphrasing) of individual sources and call this synthesis. **A series of summaries is not a synthesis!**

A key difference between them is that they place different amounts of emphasis on **the amount evidence** and **the purpose** for which the evidence is used.

- **Use of evidence:** Simple summaries inevitably devote more page-space to an individual source than do syntheses. An essay focused on a single source may feature several longer quotes, each of which is followed by several sentences interpreting their meaning. Synthetic writing typically uses fewer quotes and, when quotes are used in synthesis, they are usually brief excerpts. However, synthetic writing still *does* use quotes, especially for other authors’ phrases, concepts, or terms that are important to the synthetic argument.
- **Purpose of interpreting evidence:** An essay focused on a single typically presents textual evidence in order to convince readers that a particular interpretation of the *meaning* of the text can be justified. A synthesis essay analyzes texts with a slightly different purpose: it seeks to persuade readers that there is a meaningful relationship among a *group of texts*. It draws evidence from individual texts in order to characterize the relationship *among* Put another way, when summarizing you use interpretive statements to describe how a **text functions on its own**; when synthesizing, your interpretive job is to explain the **conversation among the texts**.

Synthesis is an expansion of what you've learned already

The good news is you've already done some synthesis in this class! You were synthesizing when you compared *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in order to argue whether Adam Smith's overall perspective was cohesive, and also when you used an outside source to provide a new perspective when you analyzed a development text. Undertaking synthesis requires you to use many of the writing techniques we studied previously, including presenting textual evidence, writing interpretive statements, organizing paragraphs around a clear purpose, and using linking phrases to show readers the logical relationships among ideas.

Compared to the previous essay assignments, The Literature Review Essay asks you to make links across multiple texts, to express how individual texts relate to larger groups of works, and to formulate an argument about what a group of texts has in common and how it differs from other groups of texts focused on the same topic.

Two metaphors for synthesis

Doing synthesis in an essay is similar to **the work of a museum curator** when putting together an exhibit. The curator takes a bunch of existing objects (such as works of art or historical artifacts) and places them together in order to express a message to museum visitors. The objects in the exhibit were created by different people and for a wide variety of purposes. Some objects were intended to express a certain emotion, others to serve as a religious object or a cooking implement. In organizing them into an exhibit, the curator has their own goals. They want to use the objects to show viewers something significant about, say, the relationship between French impressionist painting styles and rapid industrialization, or novel religious ideas and technological change in Qing dynasty China. To convey these meanings, the curator organizes the objects, placing them in different displays, and writing short texts describing how they fit together. Because of the curator's work, museum visitors perceive new meaning in the objects on display. Paintings of windmills become expressions of shared anxieties about social change; sophisticated pottery reveals the interconnection of spiritual and economic values.

Let's connect the pieces of this metaphor directly to writing techniques. A passage of interpretive summary about a text plays a similar role to a placard describing a single museum object. The passage focuses on one source's arguments and priorities.

Just as piling together a bunch of objects and placards wouldn't create a compelling museum exhibit, writing a series of summaries does not achieve good synthesis. Instead, it leads to a disjointed and repetitive text that is likely to confuse readers. To accomplish synthesis, *you* must curate. Re-state and re-frame your sources to express how they relate to one another. If several authors repeat the same information, don't allow your text to become repetitive. Instead, compose overview statements that express sources' similarities, perhaps referring to multiple sources within a single sentence.

A second metaphor for synthesis is the notion of **narrating a conversation**. Introductions to scholarly research often describe academic texts as individual strands of a single ongoing conversation among researchers in a particular field. Imagine that you stop by a party where the authors of your textual sources are having a lively debate. Each new interlocutor responds to something a previous speaker had said, confirming, challenging, or building on the ideas that

went before. When you write a synthesis, you act like a reporter who summarizes the conversation for people who couldn't attend the party.

This metaphor underscores the difference between synthesis and summary. To retell the conversation in a way that interested people, you wouldn't simply repeat what the debaters said one after the other, in the order they said it. Instead, you'd organize the various statements in order to tell a coherent story about two major factions that fiercely contested a certain point, or about how a new arrival fired up the room by raising a new dimension no one else had thought of.

An example of synthesis

Here's an example of how you might approach narrating this conversation, using some of the texts we read earlier in the semester:

“Through the concept of ‘shared value’, Porter and Kramer (2011) argued that corporations can take certain socially beneficial actions that do not contribute to immediate profits, by pursuing actions that serve the long-term interests of *both* the company *and* the communities with which it interacts. Shared value was important because it identified a kind of corporate self-interest that was more expansive than the short-term profits that Friedman had believed were the sole objective of firms. However, even shared value neglected some important ways that socially responsible actions affect firms’ long-term success. For example, Nijhof and Jeurissen (2010) showed that by genuinely espousing social values *without* linking them to the firm’s interests, companies were better able to retain talented workers.”

Some reminders & suggestions

Remember to interpret your findings. Some writers approach synthesis by listing one fact after another. They believe this is the best way to communicate findings “objectively”. However, too much information without an organizational structure will confuse to readers, who will be left wondering: “What exactly do they want me to remember about all these sources?” Think back to the earlier sessions where we discussed the need to write statements that *interpret* textual evidence for the reader. The same lessons apply in synthesis, when you analyze across multiple sources. Each paragraph of your essay (and the essay as a whole) must present a clear message.

Express the relationships among your sources. Use transition phrases and pointing words (Graff & Birkenstein ch. 8) to connect isolated sentences about individual sources so that they tell a story.

Ensure your paragraphs include clear and direct topic sentences. This is one of the easiest ways to do the work of interpreting. Assess where in the paragraph you are spelling out for readers what overall message they should get from your comparison of the sources. Ask: What’s the one point of this paragraph? Then make sure you state that point in a place that makes sense for the reader. (As a general rule, the strongest place to put the point is within the first two sentences in about 75 percent of paragraphs. A smaller number of paragraphs work best with the point at the end.) Your paraphrasing, quotes, and explanation of your sources then provide the evidence to back up the paragraph’s point.

Sources used to develop this handout

- University of Arizona Global Campus Writing Center. (2021). "Synthesis." University of Arizona Global Campus. <https://writingcenter.uagc.edu/synthesis>
- Warwick, Colleen. (2011). "Help... I've Been Asked to Synthesize!" Course handout. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University