Introduction to Synthesis Essay

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At the beginning of the course, we discussed the close connection between reading and writing. And, as you have learned by writing the previous three essays, we need to critically read and carefully annotate our texts in order to join in the conversation about a particular topic. Through reading and annotating, we recognize that, within an academic conversation, we can make a number of connections between the ideas of multiple authors. When we identify and analyze these connections, we can begin to synthesize ideas.

When we use multiple sources within an essay, research paper, report, proposal, or other type of writing, we often need to synthesize ideas. In fact, the ability to synthesize the ideas of others is a valuable tool that you will use quite often in college as well as in your professional and even your personal life. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to familiarize you with the process of synthesizing the ideas and arguments of multiple texts.

As your textbooks explain, to synthesize sources is to go beyond writing a summary. Certainly, like a summary, a synthesis requires you to provide an overview or a gist of an idea or an argument found in a source. However, when synthesizing, in addition to providing the gist of an idea or an argument, you also demonstrate that you understand how multiple authors “speak” to each other through their writing in order to develop an ongoing conversation about a topic. So, writing a synthesis does not mean that you simply identify the main idea of one source—writing a synthesis requires you to discuss the relationship between multiple ideas within various sources that discuss a similar issue.

Let’s look at the topic of education, which we studied earlier in this course. We read the Edmundson and the Postman essays for this discussion of education. The following list provides a sample of how we might begin to synthesize the ideas and arguments of these two sources. Notice how we are noting the connections (often similarities and differences) among the two sources.

- Both Postman and Edmundson are concerned about the quality of education that students receive.
- While Edmundson focuses on college-aged students, Postman focuses on students in elementary and secondary school.
- Both authors tend to agree that the media teaches students values that are at odds with an effective education; they are concerned with the amount of entertainment that is found in education and argue that the media encourages students to expect their learning to be entertaining.
- Postman tends to focus his attention on the use of television within schools, but Edmundson discusses American culture at large, in particular American consumer culture.
- Neither author brought in perspectives from students, though. This omission might make the reader wonder about the student perspectives. Where are their voices in this conversation?
• Both essays contribute to the ongoing conversation about the state of our education, but these authors focus on the conversation of how media can affect the delivery of education as well as the attitudes of students.

These examples are similar to the connections you should begin to make as you read the assigned readings for the synthesis essay. The main difference between the above example and your essay, of course, will be that you are going to use at least five sources—not just two sources—in your essay. Thus, you’ll need to read critically and take careful notes to prepare for writing the synthesis essay.

When organizing your ideas to write the synthesis essay, then, you will determine the main issues of the conversation that you have chosen to explore for this essay (either 1) media’s impacts on female gender roles or 2) media’s impacts on children). Then, you will use the sources (the assigned readings from Inquiry) to support and inform the main ideas of this conversation. For example, if one discussion in a synthesis essay was focused on the concern that both Edmundson and Postman share for the quality of education that students receive, you would need to support this discussion by bringing in examples (quotes, paraphrases, or summaries) from the essays to show that both authors have concerns for education. In other words, prove that both authors do discuss this issue by offering textual examples to your readers.

For this assignment, be sure to carefully read the requirements listed in the assignment sheets. Also, you will probably want to use the organizational tools posted for this assignment.

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