Synthesis

What is synthesis? It's a written discussion that draws on two or more sources. Academic writers do this to demonstrate they're familiar with a conversation and to add their own voice to that conversation. The writer must use language choices (e.g., transitional words/phrases) and organizational choices to clearly convey to readers how two or more sources relate to one another and to the point the writer is trying to make. This sounds simple enough, but it takes a lot of thinking and planning to synthesize effectively.

When you synthesize two or more sources, that means you have already read and critically thought about the sources and understand the relationships between the sources. For instance, is the information in source B an extended illustration of the general point in source A? Would it be useful to compare and contrast source C with source B? Having read and considered sources A, B, and C, can you infer something else—in other words, D (not another source, but your own idea)?

Academic writers use 2 different types of synthesis: 1) explanatory and 2) argumentative, and you’ll likely use both in your Senior Sem project. Here’s an example of more explanatory synthesis:

Feminism and feminist criticism also contribute in key ways to ideological criticism. Many feminist scholars and critics conceptualize feminism as the effort to eliminate relations of domination not just for women but for all individuals. They employ feminist or ideological criticism to discover how the rhetorical construction of identity markers such as gender are used as a justification for domination, how such domination is constructed as natural, and how that naturalness can be challenged. Feminist scholarship and criticism began in the communication discipline with three key texts. In Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation,” published in 1973, she suggested that the rhetoric of the contemporary women's movement consists of substantive and stylist components so distinctive that it constitutes a unique genre. This essay thus constituted the first effort to reconceptualize rhetorical constructs from a feminist perspective. An essay by Cheris Kramer (now Kramarae), “Women’s Speech: Separate but Unequal?,” published the following year, raised the possibility of sex-linked linguistic signals, but Kramarae also urged that women as language users be considered individually rather than as part of a general category. Her essay thus foreshadowed the development of an emphasis on differences among women for the purposes of theorizing. In “The Womanization of Rhetoric,” published in 1979, Sally Miller Gearhart challenged a fundamental tenet of rhetorical studies—the definition of rhetoric as persuasion—and suggested that feminism necessarily transforms rhetorical constructs and theories.

And here is an example of what argumentative synthesis can look like and the steps necessary to create it:

1. **First, I need to determine the claim I want to make:**
   I want to make an argument about the critical reception of the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. I'll argue, “Contrary to overly critical responses like bell hooks,’ BOTSW encourages viewers to question simplistic, stereotypical readings of black men through its complex portrayal of Wink’s character.”

2. **Then, I need to select appropriate material to synthesize:**
   - Summaries of various scenes from BOTSW
   - hooks: “Wink is the representative hard badass black man. His character is a composite of all the racist/sexist hateful stereotypes that mass media projects about black masculinity” (par. 8).
Bean: “The mere presence of White’s point exposes there is definitely a problem in the depiction of black people in the media, but hooks’ utilization of the statement also suggests we as people are incapable of transcending beyond the mere image of Wink and attaching meaning to his stereotypical state of mind” (par. 6)

3. Finally, I can write a paragraph that synthesizes my argument with others’ ideas

ICE Your Borrowed Material
An extremely important aspect of synthesis is that you not just include quotes, summaries, and paraphrases (q/s/p), but that you engage with them. You cannot assume that other readers will understand the significance of a q/s/p exactly as you do, so you need to be sure not only to include a good q/s/p but also to explicate or explain the significance of the q/s/p. You also need to be sure you are connecting the q/s/p to the overall argument you’re trying to make. Don’t rely on your readers to supply those connections; they may not supply the connections you’re intending, which could ruin your ability to convincingly support your point or persuade your readers.

You can follow a general rule when you include q/s/p in your writing: ICE (which stands for INTRODUCE, CITE, EXPLAIN) your borrowed material.

**Introduce:** You need to provide some sort of signal phrase that introduces the q/s/p and begins to suggest some context for the q/s/p. For example in the paragraph above, I introduce the quote from hooks with this signal phrase: “well-known feminist scholar bell hooks argues in her review of BOTSW,“ and because I’ve already said “Unfortunately, some viewers of the movie have focused exclusively on the ways Wink embodies the negative stereotypical representations of black men,” readers know the context for why I’ve included this quote from hooks.

**Cite:** After clearly indicating where the q/s/p comes from and what its context is, include the actual quote (i.e., give the borrowed material and cite it).

**Explain:** But then perhaps the most important part is to remember to explain why you’ve included the q/s/p in this paragraph in the first place. For instance, with hooks’ quote, I’ve already said that I am disagreeing with scholars whose reviews of the film are one-sided, so readers know that hooks is an example of that type of argument. I then also put hooks in conversation with Bean to show that not all critics responded to the film the same way, which lends some credibility to my own argument. And of course all along, hooks’ quote is closely tied to my own argument about the film.

Here’s another quick example of ICE:

Well-known critical scholar bell hooks’ review of BOTSW presents viewers with important criticisms that were initially overlooked in the widespread praise for the film. For instance, she argues, “Amid many real life tragedies of adult violation of children (i.e., Penn State), violations that subject small children to verbal abuse, physical and psychological violence’ [sic] sexual assault, it is truly a surreal imagination that can look past the traumatic abuse Hushpuppy endures” (par. 19). This is an important argument from hooks because….

**Now you try Synthesis and ICE**
Use ideas from the sources you’ve found so far to compose a short paragraph that includes either explanatory or argumentative synthesis.
Despite some critics’ opinions, the film \textit{Beasts of the Southern Wild (BOTSW)} encourages viewers to question simplistic, stereotypical readings of black men through its complex portrayal of a black father’s (Wink’s) character as simultaneously feared brute and compassionate caregiver. Unfortunately, some viewers of the movie have focused exclusively on the ways Wink embodies the negative stereotypical representations of black men. For example, well-known feminist scholar bell hooks argues in her review of \textit{BOTSW} that there are many points in the film where Wink enacts the role of “representative hard badass black man,” whose “character is a composite of all the racist/sexist hateful stereotypes that mass media projects about black masculinity” (par. 8). And to be sure, viewers do clearly see these stereotypes play out at various points in the film, such as in scenes where Wink hits his daughter and in scenes where he uses abusive language to make others fear him or acquiesce to his desires. However, in making this all-encompassing claim about Wink’s character, hooks overlooks the equally important scenes where Wink is shown worrying about his daughter’s well being and providing for her. Viewers clearly see these stereotype-breaking representations at various points in the film, too. For instance, when heavy rain begins to fall on the Bathtub, Wink places Hushpuppy in a boat and tells her to keep swimmies on her arms to ensure she will survive if their home floods. Likewise, there are various moments in the film where viewers see Wink providing lessons for his young daughter because he knows he soon won’t be around to care for her himself, as in the scene where he admonishes a man for teaching Hushpuppy to rely on a knife to open a crab; Wink demands that Hushpuppy use only her two hands to open the crab, teaching her to be as self-reliant as possible. In viewing this scene as solely “one of the most disturbing scenes in the film,” one where Wink exerts “dominance and control over everyone” (par. 9), hooks misses Wink’s humanness and humaneness; she misses the look of fear in his eyes that suggests viewers’ reading of this scene is meant to be more complicated that it initially might appear. And, in fact, when movie viewers allow themselves to attend to more complex understandings in these simultaneous representations of Wink as both negative stereotype as well as caring father, they are able to, as film critic Travis Bean argues responsible movie viewers should do, “[transcend] beyond the \textit{mere image} of Wink and [attach] meaning to his stereotypical state of mind” (par. 6). Contrary to one-sided arguments by critics like hooks, then, \textit{BOTSW} not only presents but also artfully complicates the mass media’s well-worn stereotypes of black men, encouraging viewers to look and look again before making final judgments.