

Summary, Synthesis, and Analysis of Sources



Many writing assignments will include integrating sources. Common ways to integrate and interact with sources include summary, synthesis, and analysis. This handout outlines these approaches to working with sources, but always tailor your work to your audience and assignment.

Summary

Often, your audience may be unfamiliar with a source you are using, and summary provides a useful overview. Summary relates key information from a source without adding personal interpretation. For example, when referring to a work of fiction, summary may include explanation of the plot, character, or author's biography. For scientific works, you might summarize how a particular study was conducted, who participated in the testing, or other relevant details that are not common knowledge.

Do	Don't
Select and restate the most important points	Tell your reader what those points mean or how to interpret them
Include relevant details	Become overburdened with unimportant side notes

Synthesis

While summary merely relates the key points of an individual source, synthesis shows how ideas are related or work together across multiple sources. Since no individual study or work can completely prove your claim, gathering and connecting sources is a crucial step toward validating or supporting an idea or claim. When examining sources, identify similarities between them and evaluate how they fit into the body of work as a whole. A good way to start synthesis is by asking what meaning or conclusion can be drawn from the collected sources or data?"

Do	Don't
Draw out the main points or conclusions of the texts both individually and collectively	Worry about specific details or conclusions
Reference relevant differences/similarities and explain how they add to the overall understanding	Comment on the meaning or significance of the individual sources
Identify overarching themes	Tell your readers what happened point-by-point

Analysis

Both summary and synthesis focus on what is stated in the text; analysis, on the other hand, involves your own insights and interpretations. Effective analysis often requires some outside knowledge of the genre, audience, or rhetorical situation. Good questions to ask might include the following: Why would the author use this phrase, detail, or explanation? How does this source inform, support, or refute my claim or stance on the topic? What are the implications related to the information provided by this source?

Do	Don't
Explain how the source supports your argument	Simply repeat the quotation in different words
Tell readers what to understand from the source	Assume your source will speak for itself
Comment directly on the source and its relation to your topic	Comment only on your topic in general

The following example analyzing a series of paintings demonstrates summary, synthesis, and analysis:

Summary: This section focuses on describing the features of the paintings that are most important for the reader to understand.

The painting's first panel shows a crowd of African Americans in a train station going to various northern cities. The next panel portrays a white man operating machinery explaining that there was a labor shortage in the North. The third panel shows a group of African Americans carrying luggage and walking together. The fourth panel shows a black man pounding a spike with a hammer, saying that African American labor remained "after all others [types] had been exhausted" (Turner, *Jacob Lawrence*). So we can see a pattern: African American group, white individual, African American group, black individual. Although the pattern does not stay exactly this way throughout the series, the back-and-forth between depictions of individuals and groups is quite common. This variation (both in this painting and in the series as a whole) emphasizes that the experience of displacement, though initially seen as a social or group movement, is really driven by individual causes and struggles.

Synthesis: This section identifies a pattern that connects the features across the entire set of works.

Analysis: This section explains what the pattern means and how it relates to the overall argument of the paper.

Paragraph adapted from: De Souza, Michael. "Economic Determinism and Ambition in the *Migration* Series by Jacob Lawrence." *The MLA Style Center*, 15 May 2016, <https://style.mla.org/sample-papers/>.