

How to Write a Synthesis Paper for Distance Ed Courses

As I begin this, I want to stress two broad concepts:

- I am aware of the restrictions faced by the students: no Internet connection, poor quality library, etc. That is why I wrote this as a “synthesis” assignment, not a “research” assignment. Here is a good definition of synthesis writing, drawn from our textbook:

The use of outside sources to gather information and opinions, in order to develop ideas, amass evidence, and support arguments. Synthesis enables writers to do more than simply express their opinion—it enables them to enter the conversation about their topic already being held in the wider world. It also allows them to complicate their ideas, to see more than one side, and to marshal information and logical arguments in the service of their position.¹

Several students have written successful papers, using nothing more than the essays available in *50 Essays*.

- This kind of writing does not exactly follow a recipe. I cannot write instructions that say, “Follow these steps and you are guaranteed a successful paper.” This is because research/synthesis is a process of discovery in which you normally begin with a fairly fuzzy idea of what you want to say, and the paper gets refined and adjusted as you go along. It is not like filling in a tax form; it is much more like being in a conversation, and sometimes the end is unpredictable.

Step 1: Thinking

I am going to assume that you have been doing the reading throughout the course. It was arranged according to several broad themes, and I assume you had personal thoughts and reactions to the reading, some of which you did not write in the assigned papers.

I am also going to assume you have access to the assignment for this last paper:

Find a topic within this “American/other” discussion, formulate a research question, and present your answer in a six-page essay which includes support from at least four outside sources.

This assignment was written in rather general language for two reasons:

1. By the time a student is ending the second semester, a certain amount of “self-feeding” is expected. You should be moving away from essay assignments that prescribe exactly what you must do because mature scholarship is a matter of asking smart, interesting questions and then finding answers to these questions.
2. This material was written to be used in several different places, and the rules differ in different venues. If you have no access to anything other than the textbook in hand, there are fifty essays that could qualify as “outside sources.”

So begin by asking yourself some questions. It would be a good idea to take notes on your answers.

- What reactions and responses have you already had to the readings you have done?
- Focusing on the “American/other” discussion, do your reactions focus on one particular issue?

¹ Cohen, Samuel, editor. *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*. 4th ed., Bedford, 2014. p. 490.

- What do you already know about this issue?
- What would you like to learn?

To make this discussion more concrete, I will use Mexican immigration as an example (but you do not have to write your paper about Mexican immigration).

- Focusing on the readings, I remember that we read a couple of things about language. There was Sherman Alexie's essay about being an Indian, and Richard Rodriguez's about being bilingual. Amy Tan wrote about the language differences between herself and her Chinese-speaking mother. And there was that long piece by Gloria Anzaldúa about the Spanish/English battle.
- There seems to be a lot of discussion about language in this textbook.
- I already know that Spanish speakers seem to shift into and out of their language very easily. I also know that there seems to be a lot of tension between Mexicans and Americans. Newspaper and TV reports (and conversations with friends) tell of people who are told to "go back where you came from" (which might mean going back to Akron or Cleveland) and people being told to "speak American."
- What I would like to learn: Is it just skin color? Why do people who speak other languages cling to them so tightly? How does it feel to abandon your birth language and speak another? Has it always been this way?

More thinking:

This has to be a paper that I can write with the resources and time available. It cannot be an "everything about everything" paper, even though I am tempted to write everything I can think of concerning immigration just so I can hit the minimum assignment length.

The instructor has made the point that successful papers have a tight focus, so I should aim at a tight focus.

Something called a hypothesis:

Somewhere in the thinking/gathering process, you need to start focusing on the point you expect to make. It is not a fully-formed **thesis** yet, but you need some sort of question you are trying to answer and have some sort of early guess what that answer will be. At this point in the process, you should expect both the question and the answer to be somewhat unsettled, but you need to have some idea what sort of idea you are working with.

This uncertainty is troubling to a lot of students, but it is part of the education process. As a student and researcher, you need to learn how to ask smart questions and find smart answers for yourself. If I were to give you a tightly-defined specific topic which you must write, you would become my research assistant to write my paper. You would not be writing your own, and you would not learn the skill of confronting a world of loosely-associated facts and making sense of it.

Step 2: Gathering

While personal memories and the memories of friends have some place in a paper such as this one, the assignment seems to look for sources such as books, articles, newspaper items, and so forth. (For the Mexican language/immigration paper, a good interview with a person who has that background might be very helpful; the interview should not be the whole paper, though.)

Here is a rule: **You can save a lot of time and trouble by focusing your gathering efforts.**

If you want to make spaghetti for dinner, you *could* go to the store without a shopping list or menu and look at every item. You *could* inspect the potatoes and broccoli and read the ingredients list on the ice cream packages. You *could* look at the cake mixes and wander up and down the pet food aisle. All that would be a waste of time, and you might not even come out with what you need to make spaghetti. You would do much better to go in with an idea what a spaghetti dinner needs (spaghetti, red sauce, parmesan cheese, and meatballs) and focus all your gathering. (What *kind* of red sauce do I want? Will I buy frozen meatballs or make them myself?) If you know you want to make spaghetti, a quick look at packages will help you. (In the frozen meatball department, you would go for the Italian, not the Swedish meatballs. You don't even have to read the ingredients list to decide which you want.)

In a similar way, you can focus your gathering efforts for this paper. Let us assume you have only *50 Essays* to work with. The book is not indexed, and the Table of Contents lists items in alphabetic order by author's last name, so you can't just look up everything related to "Mexican."

You do, however, have the titles of the items and (in this book at least) a very brief quotation from each essay. That should help.

- You look at the Dave Berry item, "Turkeys in the Kitchen," and the quotation under the Table of Contents entry, and you see this: "Men are still basically scum when it comes to helping out in the kitchen." That does not seem relate to Mexicans, bilingualism, racial prejudice, or the Spanish language, so you can safely ignore that essay.
- You look at the Brian Doyle item, "Joyas Voladores," and it seems possible because of the Spanish title, though the quotation isn't too encouraging. It's at least worth a little more inspection, so you go to the item itself and read the first and last paragraphs. It all seems to be about hummingbirds and philosophy of life. That Spanish title is only there because the birds' original name was in Spanish. We can probably ignore that article too.
- You look at the Amy Tan item, "Mother Tongue." Both the Table of Contents blurb and a quick scan of the article itself show that it's about Chinese-American, not Mexican-American language issues, but it *is* about bilingual people, so maybe this one will help.

You continue this process, evaluating sources and cutting down the stack of fifty essays to a manageable group.

As you do all of this, you are not simply shopping around. You are working toward an essay that **asks and answers an important or interesting question**. Perhaps it could be something like "Why do some immigrants cling to their original languages while others drop their first language as soon as they can?"

With that tentative question in your mind, you take notes as you read, always keeping track of the source of your material.

Eventually, you should settle on a **thesis** for your paper. A thesis is a complete declarative sentence (not just a question, and certainly not just a bare topic phrase). Most the essays in *50 Essays* appeared as magazine articles, not as academic papers, so they are a bit subtle about placing the thesis in the piece of writing. Academic essays tend to be more straightforward; often you will find the thesis at the end of the first paragraph, as you can see in “Why Educate the Children of Illegal Immigrants?” by Andrew Knutson (Module 6). His thesis sentence, “Educating illegal immigrants costs us, but not educating them will cost us much more” appears at the end of the first paragraph and is an effective summary of his whole message.

Step 3: Drafting

There are probably as many different ways to draft as there are students. Some like to make a very detailed outline and follow that as a plan. Others simply start writing and see what happens. Still others (and this is me) have a fairly loose, informal plan in mind and write to fit that plan. I am a great maker of lists, but my lists often get forgotten as I write.

This stage takes a while, perhaps 1/3 of your writing time, but it is difficult to define exactly. Here are a few ideas to guide you:

- The only point of doing a rough draft is to give you something to revise. Do not expect an early draft to be perfect.
- You will probably get stuck. Don’t let that stop you. Simply move ahead and write another part that you feel confident about. Maybe when you come back to the part that stopped you, things will look better.
- You don’t have to write the piece in order if you don’t want to. If you have no idea how to introduce your paper, write the middle part and come back.
- It’s perfectly normal for a piece to change somewhat as you write the rough draft. It’s also normal to discover that you need a quote or a bit of information that you never noted down, so the whole thing stops while you go looking for what you need.

Special notes about including outside material:

- The direct quotation should not be your main workhorse. If a quote is more than a couple of lines, ask yourself why you are putting in so much. Are those exact words golden? All of them? Would the reader understand better if you summarized the material?
- When you do decide to quote or summarize a source, be fair. Do not change anything about the quote. Do not misrepresent what the source said when you summarize.
- You will save yourself a lot of work (and guard against plagiarism) if you put the citations into the text as you write. Do not depend on your memory (and time) to come back and find all the source references later. I like to make my Works Cited page on the fly as I write the draft, not waiting until the end of the project. That way I do not miss items that I am quoting and I do not stick things on the Works Cited page that never got quoted or summarized.

Step 4: Revising

There is a lot more to revising than simply checking spelling. Revising comes in three steps, and you should probably ask the questions in this order:

Revision step #1: Content

- It's all about saying something. Did your essay actually answer your original hypothesis question? Was that a good question to ask? Should you say more?
- Is the essay true? Smart? Enough?
- What about your sources? Do they actually help you prove your point? Are you fair to them?

If the essay is running short, you cannot *revise* it bigger. You have to go back to gathering material and generating content in a drafting stage.

Revision Step #2: Rhetoric

Rhetoric = using language effectively. This is where you ask questions about

- Word choice
- Sentence style and structure
- Essay structure

Is the material said in the best possible way for this audience? Did you talk down to them? Use obscure language that they might not understand? Have you got a good introduction and conclusion? Do the main body points come in the best sequence?

Revision Step #3: Correctness

- **Copyediting:** Are all the facts correct? (Personal names, dates, and numbers are especially difficult. Double-check them. Was it President Reagan or President Regan? Did you write that Lincoln was shot in 1865 or 1965?)
- **Proofreading:** This is where you make sure you typed what you wanted to type. Did you leave out words? Did you accidentally type the same word twice twice? Maybe you repeated the same phrase the same phrase? (Hint: Reading the paper aloud or getting someone else to read it aloud to you will help at this step.)
- **Grammar and Spelling:** Finally, you get around to all the red-mark items that English teachers focus on. Do this last because you do not want to waste time fixing the spelling on things that get deleted, and you do not want to miss checking the latest addition.

For a sourced paper such as this one, you will want to take a close look at the MLA citation section of the grammar handbook and make sure that you did that part correctly too.