Tell 'em What it Ain't:
Teaching Synthesis Through Anti-Synthesis

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It's a fact that our English 112 students struggle with synthesis, although most instructors might maintain that the concept does not seem terribly complex: Synthesis happens when two or more sources combine in a meaningful way to back up an author's own point or counterargument. The simplicity of the notion makes it extra discouraging to look through a stack of rough drafts and see all the ways that our students have found to err in their execution of this basic collegiate writing skill. When we ask them, our students can usually articulate (or perhaps parrot) a definition, but the proof of their understanding of synthesis needs to be apparent in their writing—and the simple fact is that it takes some practice before students will internalize the ability to synthesize.

How, then, can we speed their development along? That's a question we often ask ourselves when looking at the rough drafts of the second synthesized essay of the course and seeing, sometimes, very little in the way of improvement. An approach I have tried and had some luck with is in teaching students to spot false synthesis in their essays—the synthesis "lookalikes" that show up time and time again as students try to make this compositional strategy work for them. When we have students who are on the look-out for synthesis that isn't—in other words, a team of synthesis detectives, always on the alert for the good and the "not quite"—the offshoot is that their research becomes more focused, their researched writing becomes more controlled, and their peer editing becomes more productive.

Basic Synthesis: What It Is

I teach my students that synthesis occurs when they offer two or more different sources as evidence or support for their own particular argumentative point or counterargument. Strategically, I have found it useful to have the class generate a list of words or phrases that can be used to show the relationships between sources—words or phrases like "agrees," "disagrees," "concurs," "expounds upon," "goes even further," "contradicts," "confirms," "clarifies," etc. Being too much of a reductionist is not a good idea when dealing with writing and its infinite possibilities, but to some extent, synthesis can be charted as a formula: "A writes, 'X'; B agrees (disagrees, elaborates upon, etc.) and writes, 'Y.'" (If synthesis is presented in such basic terms, I would hope that an instructor would try to demonstrate some of the numerous possibilities for breaking out of a standard mold.)

It is helpful, too, to deal with synthesis as a much broader concept than that which is evident at the sentence level. A synthesized essay should leave a reader with a holistic sense that the writer has conveyed his or her own new ideas, and has drawn upon a chorus of voices for support. Synthesis, then, is not just something that can be pointed to and labeled; rather, it should be an overall sense that a piece of writing gives.

What It Ain't

Whether or not the very basic explanation of synthesis here satisfies every instructor's definition of the term, it is at least a jumping off point for a more complex discussion. In my class, this explanation turns quickly to what synthesis is not—the misunderstandings about synthesis that can lead students awry. The following are just a few of the caution signs that I teach my students to watch out for:

- <u>Two or more sources in a paragraph—period</u>. There is a popular idea that synthesis just means that a paragraph contains two or more sources. Having more than one source in a paragraph is an excellent first step toward synthesis; however, I would content that true synthesis isn't happening unless a relationship between the sources is apparent. I believe that it is possible to have synthesis on a more sophisticated level, and to demonstrate a relationship between sources without using a connective word or phrase from a standard list; synthesis can be achieved subtly if a writer displays a careful progression of ideas, with one source building upon what another says. However, at the rudimentary level, it is hard to pull off synthesis without a connective word, and so I have my students look for these signals. Here's an example:

  > *Chocolate comes to us from South America, where it was once consumed as a bitter, hot beverage, according to Joe Schmoe, author of "Ahh! Chocolate" (12). The beverage quickly gained favor in Europe. Ima Goodbar points out that Queen Isabella had an elaborate hot chocolate set that she used on important state occasions (276).*

A student should be applauded for getting information, including background information, from a variety of sources; however, simply placing source material side-by-side does not make for synthesis. I would agree with those who would claim that the example above falls into a gray area—the link between the ideas is clear, although a synthesis word or phrase is not used. Still, a paper that included only this sort of stacked information would not be judged successful in terms of synthesis in my classroom.

- <u>One source related only to itself</u>. Sometimes students will offer a quote early in a paragraph, and later in the paragraph, the same source will be shown in relationship to itself (hopefully by agreement, as a source disagreeing with itself would be off-putting, to say the least). A more sophisticated way of attempting synthesis within a single source occurs when voices quoted within that source are related to one another. Here's another made-up example, for the purposes of illustration:

  > *In Karen Craigo's article "Milton Hershey Should be Canonized," Lisa Simpson states, "I love chocolate" (14). Wayland Smithers agrees with this sentiment, stating, "Chocolate is the greatest discovery humankind can claim" (qtd. in Craigo 17).*

Note that both quotes come from the same source. This shows some sophisticated thinking, with appropriate connections being made, and it is a

type of synthesis—a relationship between ideas is being demonstrated. Still, it's not what I'm looking for in my class; note how my definition requires two or more different sources to be used.

- **Random synthesis words thrown in for good measure**. Often I will read a draft and come across the sort of signal words I'm looking for—agrees, disagrees, etc.—but the words are not being used to link sources; rather, they are used merely to introduce a source, and seemingly the agreement or disagreement indicated is with the author's own ideas. Here's a sample:

> One reason chocolate should be on every elementary school lunch menu is that it makes students feel so good. Rita Dove, president of the Dove Chocolate Corporation, agrees, stating, "Chocolate is the perfect end to a satisfying luncheon" (qtd. in Craigo 18).

It may be helpful to encourage students to use words very deliberately. A word like "agrees" should probably be reserved for those occasions when a real relationship is being explored. Students may be tempted to pile synthesis words into an essay, even when synthesis is not present. Let them know that you aren't giving bonus points for clever use of "concurs" or "elaborates upon."

- **False relationships between sources**. When students are trying hard to attain synthesis (the compositional equivalent of nirvana), sometimes they struggle in figuring out exactly what the relationship is between Source A and Source B. The result of their confusion can be strange indeed; often, it is what I would call false synthesis—a made-up relationship between sources. It might look something like this:

> Perhaps the biggest reason taxpayers should be given a standard chocolate deduction is the importance that this commodity has to our entire economic system. Nicole Kidman, author of "If I Ate Anything, It Would Be Chocolate," writes, "So much in our society is dependent upon our ability to attain chocolate, whether this is through cocoa powder, mocha lattes, or a Cadbury Cream Egg" (42). But in his article "Chocolate Tastes As Good As Halle Berry's Tonsils," Adrien Brody disagrees. He states, "Chocolate is important to American life, but I like vanilla, too" (67).

There is a relationship to be drawn between the two quotes offered here, but a student who chose to state that the articles "disagree" would be missing the mark.

- **Too much of a good thing**. Be sure to alert students to the fact that lots and lots of synthesis may not be as effective in an essay as some well-placed, select instances. I believe it is effective to get them into the habit of locating their own voice within a synthesized passage—perhaps by physically highlighting the parts of a paragraph that contain their own words. Are they interpreting quotes and furthering their own ideas, or are they just piling quotes

one on top of the other? The highlighting method may allow students to ascertain on their own if they are being overshadowed by source material.

- <u>Too much of one source</u>. Students would be well advised to make sure that one of their sources isn't driving the essay. If every paragraph contains material from a particular source on a student's Works Cited page, or if whole paragraphs aren't synthesized, but rather offer this single, particular source alone, it could be that a writer is using copied structure—relying too heavily upon a source's argumentative structure, rather than coming up with his or her own. Students should be on the alert for this problem.

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Improving Synthesis

Once students become savvy to the ways they can err with synthesis, it is likely that they will be more able to recognize true synthesis when they see it. Perhaps more importantly, they will start to develop a sense of whether an essay or a paragraph *feels* synthesized: Are meaningful relationships between sources explored for the enhancement of the essay? Does the author's voice dominate, or is a particular source or group of sources taking over?

Here are some questions students can ask as they peer review each other's work:

1. Is the relationship between sources made clear?
2. Are synthesis words or phrases used to link two or more different sources?
3. Does the synthesis word or phrase accurately summarize the relationship between/among sources?
4. Does synthesized source material overwhelm your voice?
5. Is one source synthesized or otherwise used more than the other sources on the Works Cited page?

Sometimes in the early going I set a minimum number of the instances of synthesis I want to see in a paper. Of course, I do this at the risk of communicating to students that writing is formulaic—and it absolutely isn't. Still, if you expect a clearly passing essay to have at least, say, three instances of synthesis, or perhaps four or five, or one instance per paragraph, add this to your list of questions—"Are there at least three instances of synthesis?" I've had the most success when I've made my expectations clear.

Good luck with your efforts to teach synthesis, and please let me know if you have any additions to this list, or tried and true synthesis strategies of your own!