

#36) Explanatory Synthesis

According to Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum (Behrens and Rosen 2003), “A synthesis is a written discussion that draws on two or more sources. It follows that your ability to write syntheses depends on your ability to infer relationships among sources” (94).

What does that mean?

Think of academic writing as a conversation taking place over time. Scientific debates are a good example of this “conversation.” Scientist A writes a paper in which she draws a conclusion about her experiment. Scientist B writes a paper that respectfully disagrees with Scientist A’s findings, and offers some alternative suggestions. Scientist A writes a paper saying Scientist B is woefully mistaken. Scientist C writes a paper that says his experiment proves that both parties are wrong, and the whole endeavor should have focused on another branch of science entirely, possibly involving cats.

Your job for this assignment is to “listen in on” the discussion taking place between the writers of the articles. It is important that you be fair to everyone by taking the time to understand each viewpoint so that you will represent the discussion accurately. (Think of your role in this situation to be more like a reporter than a gossiping eavesdropper.)

Your essay for this assignment will be the “report” of the discussion. As Behrens and Rosen remind us: “Your job in writing an explanatory paper [...] is not to argue a particular point, but rather to *present the facts in a reasonably objective manner*” (101). The best way to approach the assignment (after reading and annotating the articles) is to first draw out relationships between the sources. Pick a few points that at least two of the sources both discuss. In the above example, something that might be addressed by all the scientists on the topic is the research method of Scientist A. For your essay, you would then be able to summarize the research method and *report* what each scientist had to say about Scientist A’s method.

How do I do this?

The above approach can work for any topic. For instance, perhaps you read three sources on TV violence. The three sources may each say very different things about TV violence—and may not even be aware of the articles by the other two writers—but they may all bring up the **subtopic** of whether or not violence affects children. You would then be able to explain that the question of how TV violence affects children is part of the debate and *report* what each of the three sources says about this part of the issue. This could be one full paragraph in your essay, perhaps organized like this:

- a. Topic Sentence: One issue that A, B, and C discuss is whether or not TV violence affects children negatively.
- b. Summarize Author A’s comments on this issue
- c. Summarize Author B’s comments on this issue
- d. Summarize Author C’s comments on this issue

An important thing to remember while working on this essay, however, is that each author may not *explicitly* refer to the subtopic you have found. This is where the skill of *inference* comes in to play and why the assignment is called “explanatory” rather than just “synthesis.” As a reporter of the discussion taking place, you may have to read between the lines and/or explain connections you see between the sources that may not be spelled out in the text. Rather than quoting or paraphrasing something from an article, you may have to *explain* a writer’s perspective or standpoint *in your own words* based on the general information you’ve read. Applying the skill of inference is an important objective of this assignment.

Depending on your instructor, you will probably need to include 2-4 subtopics in your paper. Keep in mind that you may be able to include a subtopic that only two out of the three articles refer to. The body paragraphs for this assignment might have an organization like this:

Subtopic I

- a. Topic sentence
- b. Source A's view of the subtopic
- c. Source B's view of the subtopic
- d. Source C's view of the subtopic

Subtopic II

- a. Topic sentence
- b. Source A's view of the subtopic
- c. Source C's view of the subtopic

Subtopic III

- a. Topic sentence
- b. Source A's view of the subtopic
- c. Source B's view of the subtopic
- d. Source C's view of the subtopic

Keep in mind that you may also want to vary the order of your sources from subtopic to subtopic, in part so your essay is less repetitious, and also because some sources' views may compliment each other more effectively.

How do I introduce and conclude my essay?

After you have drafted the body paragraphs, you should draft an introductory paragraph that introduces the general discussion you're reporting on and gives a preview of the subtopics you will be focusing on. Your instructor may ask you to include a thesis statement. A **thesis statement** typically presents the major claim of your writing (see our [handout](#) on thesis statements and essay maps). Because your purpose in this assignment is primarily a summary presentation of others' arguments, you will simply need to clarify your topic in a sentence. For example, if you were working with the articles about TV violence, your thesis might look like this:

Many people agree that television violence is on the rise; however, experts disagree about the ramifications of this trend.

To introduce your readers to the particular subtopics you focus on in your essay, your instructor may ask you to include an **essay map** that lists them. An essay map for the above example might look like this:

Authors A, B, and C discuss the issues of Subtopic I, Subtopic II, and Subtopic III in their articles on the controversy.

Be sure you understand your instructor's guidelines for the introduction; he or she may have specific advice for this part of your essay.

A conclusion for this essay may simply recap the main points of the discussion and summarize the authors' standpoints on those issues. It's important that you refrain from repeating yourself too much. Depending on your instructor's guidelines, you may also want to comment on the importance of the issue in general. For more help with this, check out our [handout](#) on introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions.

(LT 2/04; updated by ADH 1/06)