

What is a Synthesis Essay?

The main purpose of a synthesis essay is to make insightful connections. Those connections can show the relationship(s) between parts of a work or even between two or more works. It is your job to explain why those relationships are important. In order to write a successful synthesis essay, you must gather research on your chosen topic, discover meaningful connections throughout your research, and develop a unique and interesting argument or perspective.

A synthesis is not a summary. A synthesis is an opportunity to create new knowledge out of already existing knowledge, i.e., other sources. You combine, “synthesize,” the information in your sources to develop an argument or a unique perspective on a topic. Your thesis statement becomes a one-sentence claim that presents your perspective and identifies the new knowledge that you will create.

Before writing your synthesis

1. Narrow a broad or general topic to a specific topic:

In a short essay, completely covering a large topic is impossible, so picking a specific, focused topic is important. For example, the broad topic of global warming would need to be narrowed down to something more specific, like the effects of automobile exhaust on an ecosystem.

2. Develop a working thesis statement:

A working thesis statement should include a rough idea of your topic and the important point you want to make about that topic. Writing this statement at the top of a rough draft or outline and looking at it often can help you remain focused throughout the essay. However, the thesis statement that you begin with is not set in stone. If you find that your essay shifts topic slightly, you can change your thesis in later drafts so that it matches your new focus.

3. Decide how you will use your sources:

After completing your research and gathering sources, you may have a large or overwhelming amount of information. However, the purpose of a synthesis essay is to use only the most important parts of your research, the information that will best support your claim. At this point, you must decide which sources, and/or which parts of those sources, you will use.

4. Organize your research:

Now, decide the order in which you will present your evidence, the various arguments you will employ, and how you will convince your readers.

Writing your synthesis

The following synthesis essay is from *Reading and Writing across the Curriculum* (2001, pp. 91-97). In this essay, the author found various sources on the same topic (the purposes of U.S. forces in Vietnam) and used certain parts of those sources to support the thesis statement. The guiding ideas of the paper—the thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph and the corresponding topic sentences—are highlighted in gray.

The increasing American involvement in Vietnam can be traced to at least three flawed attitudes. The first was a belief that the United States was on the side of right and justice and that the communists were the aggressors. The second was the assumption that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Cong had little grass-roots support in the South and that the people of South Vietnam welcomed American protection. The third was the unshakable confidence in the military's ability to accomplish anything it wanted owing to the superiority of the American fighting man and his technology—a belief instilled by a long history of wars fought and won by U.S. troops. This combination of self-righteousness and arrogance blinded America to the realities of the situation in Vietnam.

America was sure that its military intervention in South Vietnam was morally right. Defenders of the war saw the conflict in terms of the forces of evil (communism) against the forces of good (freedom). Supporters of intervention believed that to refuse aid was to abandon the peaceful and democratic nation of South Vietnam to "communist enslavement" ("Public Hearings" 977). President Johnson painted a picture of a "small and brave" nation beleaguered by communist aggression. The president asked "only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their country in their own way" (Johnson, "War Aims" 976). Congress had already agreed; in its Gulf of Tonkin resolution in 1964, it accused the communists of carrying out an unprovoked attack on American naval vessels and said that this attack was only part of a larger attack on the "freedom" of the South (971). Some of the fighting men tended to see the war in black-and-white terms, with the communists as evil and Americans as good. After witnessing some brutalities committed by the Viet Cong, one soldier wrote: "I wanted to go down and kill all those...bastards...Those slobs have to be stopped, even if it takes every last believer in a democracy and a free way of life to do it" ("War of Atrocities" 974).

The official position was that America was acting out of purely altruistic means. Both Johnson and Congress insisted that the United States had no "territorial, military or political ambitions." In addition to saving the grateful South Vietnamese, a million of whom had "voted with their feet against communism" (Public Hearings" 977), America was reaffirming the world's faith in its resolve. The free peoples of the world were counting on America to defend South Vietnam, said Johnson ("War Aims" 975-76), and to abandon Vietnam would be to shake their confidence in America and her word. The price of withdrawal would be the freedom of fourteen million people, the honor of our own country and eventually, the security of the free world," said a Young Americans for Freedom representative in 1965 ("Public Hearings" 976).

In reality, the position of the United States was impractical and doomed to failure. South Vietnam was not the free state threatened by communist "enslavement" that the U.S. government described. It had been independent only since 1956; and Ho Chi Minh was not trying to conquer new territory but to reunify the recently divided nation of Vietnam. The American view of communist "aggression" is given an interesting perspective by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who pointed out that to the Chinese the United States appeared to be the aggressor. How would we feel, he asked, if the Chinese had 400,000 troops in Southern Mexico and were busy putting down a pro-U.S. revolution there? The question "of who the aggressor is depends a good deal on who looks through what glass and how darkly, he argued (978). South Vietnam was no bastion of democracy, either. The South Vietnamese government did not hold promised democratic elections in 1956 because it knew that the

communists had popular support in the country. Even the government admitted that South Vietnam's political situation was "deeply serious" with "repressive actions" frequently being committed ("U.S. Policy on Vietnam" 128). The American-supported Diem government was so unpopular that widespread protests against it led to a successful coup in 1963. The people of South Vietnam resented American troops and resisted "Americanization," even on the smallest scale. An American Quaker in Vietnam wrote of a South Vietnamese schoolteacher chastising the arrogance of an American soldier for throwing candy to Vietnamese schoolchildren, just as if he were throwing bread crumbs to pigeons. The schoolteacher charged that the Americans were "making beggars of our children, prostitutes of our women, and communists of our men" ("Americanization" 978). United States was defending South Vietnam against the will of much of the population, and American motives were not as selfless or benevolent as the government claimed. Despite Congress's assertion that the United States "has no territorial, military, or political ambitions in that area" ("Joint Resolution" 971), the containment of communism is certainly a territorial and political ambition of sorts, and Congress viewed the security of South Vietnam as "vital" to American national interest. And when, in the course defending the country, American troops committed actions such as the destruction of the village of Ben Tre (the commanding officer later explained, "We had to destroy the village to save it") it became obvious that the United States was not working on South Vietnam's best interests ("Slaughter Goes On" 13). Instead, it was concerned mainly with defeating the communists at all costs, even if the country it was supposed to be defending was destroyed in the process.

In 1963 the White House believed that all its military goals in Vietnam could be accomplished by the end of 1965, predicting that only a few military advisors would be needed by then ("U.S. Policy in Vietnam. The military solution was seen as the correct one: the White House statement, while conceding that "improvements are being energetically sought," asserted that the "military program in South Vietnam has made progress and is sound in principle." When the Congress was confronted with and apparently unprovoked attack by North Vietnam on two of its destroyers, however, it authorized the president to treat the situation as a war (even though it never declared war) and to send in unlimited amounts of men and supplies. From a few military advisors sent to Vietnam in 1961, the American troop commitment was to escalate to more than 500,000 in 1969. But even with such vast manpower, the United States was unable to inflict "permanent setbacks" against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. Washington decided that this was due to North Vietnamese infiltration of the South, and so it increased the bombing of suspected supply routes from the North. During the three years preceding the Tet Offensive, the U.S. Air Force dropped almost as much bomb tonnage on Vietnam as had been dropped by American forces during World War II ("Slaughter Goes On" 13). In 1967, President Johnson claimed that the bombing was creating "very serious problems" for North Vietnam (Johnson, "Bombing" 972). But the next year the Rand Corporation warned that the infiltration had not been reduced significantly and that it could not see a "decisive" American victory in the "foreseeable future" ("Slaughter Goes On" 13). In spite of this, the bombing was escalated for years, increasing civilian casualties. The United States was forgetting the lesson Hitler learned in World War II with his bombing of Britain: bombing does not break the resolve of the population; it strengthens it. The North Vietnamese newspaper Nhan Dan pointed out that the bombings only served to "further incense" the population of North Vietnam ("Slaughter Goes On" 13). In spite of all this, the American public was ready to believe the government's assurance of impending victory that it took the "devastating" Tet Offensive of 1968 (a coordinated attack by

the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong on more than one hundred towns and cities in the South) to impress upon it the reality of just how costly and difficult it would be for the United States to win the war.

In the End, it was two misguided assumptions that embroiled the United States in the military and political chaos of the Vietnam War: the self-righteous belief that the political system that worked for Americans would work for everyone else and that the South Vietnamese welcomed American military intervention; and the arrogant assumption that sheer numbers and firepower would subdue a popularly supported insurrection. When we emerged, ten years later, these attitudes had been severely shaken. It would take many years for the United States to begin regaining its self-confidence.

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