Summary, Synthesis, and Analysis of Sources

Many writing assignments will require you to integrate diverse sources. Depending on the goal of the assignment, there are different ways to interact with those sources. Some of the most common are summary, synthesis, and analysis. Understanding the difference between the three will strengthen your ability to implement sources and therefore strengthen your credibility.

Summary

Often, your audience is unfamiliar with the key points and context of the discussed or quoted work. Summary relates that information without adding your 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 aren't 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 work or section, synthesis shows how these points work together to support an overarching idea. Because no individual study or work will completely prove your claim, connecting your collective sources is a crucial step toward validating your conclusion. As you examine your 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 yourself, "What meaning or conclusion can I draw from all of my data?"

Do	Don't
Draw out the main points/conclusions of your texts	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. It focuses on individual details (e.g., rhetorical tools like repetition, word choice, metaphor) and attempts to discern their effect, meaning, or purpose. Analysis might require 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? What effect is this passage intended to produce, and how does it do that?"

Do	Don't
Explain how the source supports your argument	Simply repeat the quotation in different words
Tell your reader 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." 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/.