

# Campus Academic Resource Program

## Summary and Synthesis

This handout will:

- Describe the difference between summary and synthesis
- Portray how to write a summary
- Instruct how to write a synthesis

### Summary vs. Synthesis

A **summary** is a condensed and objective restatement, in your own words, of an author's core message or argument. Short summaries focus on the central point of the material whereas longer summaries may include key supporting points.

A **synthesis** takes an interpretive approach by combining your own ideas and the information in multiple sources to form an original argument. This process looks at the relationship between different sources and how they contribute to a new and deeper understanding of the topic.

The ability to summarize sources is crucial to synthesizing information. While a **summary** focuses solely on the information in the source you are working with, a **synthesis** is driven primarily by your argument and your analysis of other sources in order to support your paper.

### Writing a Summary

The goal of a summary is to present the author's viewpoint in a clear, concise, and objective manner. In order to achieve this, it is imperative to understand the material thoroughly.

#### Approaching the Summary:

1. **Read through the text without stopping.** The objective of a first reading is to gain a better sense of the topic and the author's thesis or overall argument.
2. **Read the text again and annotate.** Underline the thesis, main arguments, topic sentences, key words and their definitions, and mark passages that were difficult to understand and that you will need to reread.
3. **Briefly outline the text.** In your own words, state the main arguments and important supporting points.
4. **Develop a thesis.** State, in your own words, the author's overall argument.
5. **Support the thesis.** Summarize the crucial points the author used to support his or her thesis.

#### Checklist for an Effective Summary:

- **Did you identify the author and the title of the source you are summarizing?**
- **Is the summary written completely in your own words?**
- **Did you avoid quoting the author?**  
Because of their brevity, summaries rarely include quotes unless it is a key term that the author has introduced to the field. For example, in "Deconstructing America," Patrick J. Buchanan repeats the phrase "diversity, equality, and democracy" multiple times throughout his essay as if it were his motto. In this case, it would be appropriate to quote the phrase when summarizing his essay.
- **Did you use language that is appropriate for a summary?**

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For example, by using phrases like “The author argues that...” and “According to the author...,” you remind the reader that you are merely stating the author’s viewpoint and not your own.

- **Is your summary completely objective?**

In addition to avoiding a direct interpretation of the material, appropriate word choice also plays an important role in keeping the objectivity of a summary.

*Consider the following:* “The author ridicules...” vs. “The author disagrees...”

*Which wording is more objective?* In using the word “ridicule,” you interpret the author’s attitude towards the opposing argument rather than merely noting that there exists a different perspective on the subject.

However, it is important to keep in mind that summaries are never truly objective, since you choose which details need to be included and which do not. Nevertheless, the goal of a summary is to explain the author’s arguments in the most objective manner possible.

- **Is your summary well organized?**

You do not have to summarize the arguments in the same order that the author presented them. Doing so can be redundant, since there are instances where writers will emphasize the same idea again later on in a work. Rather, you can rearrange them in a way that they flow better without unintentionally adding to or losing the meaning of the author’s message. A useful strategy in organizing your summary is to look for patterns/themes within the arguments in order to condense them.

- **Will your reader get a complete sense of the material after reading your summary?**

Your summary should not merely focus on one aspect of the material. It is important that the reader has a general understanding of the *entire* work you are summarizing?

### Writing a Synthesis

The goal of the synthesis is to create a discussion of the material that you are reading and to introduce a unique perspective on the topic.

#### Approaching the Synthesis:

1. **Define the purpose of the paper.** Understanding what you hope to accomplish in a paper is the most crucial aspect of beginning the writing process.
2. **Find sources that might prove useful to the assignment.** Read through the material carefully and follow the “Writing a Summary” steps to help you organize your research. By looking through the sources/articles available, you begin brainstorming about your topic and potential arguments.
3. **Formulate a thesis statement.** The thesis is the main idea of your synthesis.
4. **Research sources that both support and challenge your arguments.** Look back through your research and reflect on the patterns/connections you found between the sources. Think about how you will incorporate them into your arguments.
5. **Think about how you will organize your arguments.** Consider outlining your main ideas and supporting points. Think about the sequence of your arguments and how it will strengthen the paper.
6. **Write your first draft.** As you write your draft, you may find your ideas changing or shifting despite having an outline as a guide. This is a normal part of the writing process. Think about how these changes will affect the structure of your paper.

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7. **Revise and proofread.** During this stage of the writing process, not only should you focus on grammatical errors, but you should also focus on the content, flow, and structure of your paper. (for more information see Editing and Proofreading Strategies handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)
8. **Document your sources.** Avoid plagiarism—even if accidental—by verifying that you have cited your sources correctly both in-text and in your Reference page. (for more information see Guide to APA, Guide to MLA, or Guide to the Chicago Manual of Style handouts at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)

#### Checklist for an Effective Synthesis:

- **Did you accomplish the purpose of the assignment?**
- **Did you address possible counterarguments?**  
Look back through your research. Not only should you look for sources that support your arguments, but in order to strengthen your paper, you will also need to address potential counterarguments. Were there sources that contradicted one another? Were there sources that challenged your point of view on the subject? If so, how will you address them?
- **Do you have enough research to fully support your arguments?**  
Research will remain a constant aspect of writing a synthesis as you delve deeper into your arguments and ideas.
- **Did you present your arguments in a cohesive manner?**  
Is there a logical sequence to present your arguments? How does the arrangement of your ideas help create a clear and coherent paper?
- **Do your arguments support your thesis?**  
Are there places where you can strengthen your points? Are there places in your paper where you had to go back and reread your writing? If so, how can you rephrase those parts so that they are more clear and concise?
- **Did you cite your sources correctly within the text? Do you have a Reference page?**

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### Exercise 1: Writing a Summary

Summarize the following passage taken from the beginning of José Martí's famous manifesto, "Our America" (1891).

**Step 1:** Read the passage without stopping.

Martí, José. "Our America." *Martí: the Diplomat*. University of Pennsylvania, n.d. Web. 25 June 2014.

The conceited villager believes the entire world to be his village. Provided that he can be mayor, humiliate the rival who stole his sweetheart, or add to the savings in his strongbox, he considers the universal order good, unaware of those giants with seven-league boots who can crush him underfoot, or of the strife in the heavens between comets that go through the air asleep, gulping down worlds. What remains of the village in America must rouse itself. These are not the times for sleeping in a nightcap, but with weapons for a pillow, like the warriors of Juan de Castellanos: weapons of the mind, which conquer all others. Barricades of ideas are worth more than barricades of stones.

There is no prow that can cut through a cloudbank of ideas. A powerful idea, waved before the world at the proper time, can stop a squadron of iron-clad ships, like the mystical flag of the Last Judgment. Nations that do not know one another should quickly become acquainted, as men who are to fight a common enemy. Those who shake their fists, like jealous brothers coveting the same tract of land, or like the modest cottager who envies the esquire his mansion, should clasp hands and become one. Those who use the authority of a criminal tradition to lop off the hands of their defeated brother with a sword stained with his own blood, ought to return the lands to the brother already punished sufficiently, if do not want the people to call them robbers. The honest man does not absolve himself of debts of honor with money, at so much a slap. We can no longer be a people of leaves, living in the air, our foliage heavy with blooms and crackling or humming at the whim of the sun's caress, or buffeted and tossed by the storms. The trees must form ranks to keep the giant with seven-league boots from passing! It is the time of mobilization, of marching together, and we must go forward in close ranks, like silver in the veins of the Andes.

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*Step 2: Re-read and annotate the passage.*

### “Our America” by José Martí

The conceited villager believes the entire world to be his village. Provided that he can be mayor, humiliate the rival who stole his sweetheart, or add to the savings in his strongbox, he considers the universal order good, unaware of those giants with seven-league boots who can crush him underfoot, or of the strife in the heavens between comets that go through the air asleep, gulping down worlds. What remains of the village in America must rouse itself. These are not the times for sleeping in a nightcap, but with weapons for a pillow, like the warriors of Juan de Castellanos: weapons of the mind, which conquer all others. Barricades of ideas are worth more than barricades of stones.

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*In this particular passage, Martí poses a problem that must be solved. Therefore, the reader can expect that what follows is Martí's answer (and very likely the thesis).*

*Martí's goal in this passage is a call to action.*

*The call to action is further specified through the juxtaposition between “barricades of ideas” and “barricades of stones.” Martí further explains the reasoning behind this claim at the beginning of the following paragraph.*

*Another key point of the passage: Martí elaborates on his expectations of Latin American countries. They should also unite together against a common enemy.*

*Martí further develops and reinforces the urgency of uniting Latin America. You will not need to summarize every example. However, from these examples, you learn why Latin America is so divided (eg. land disputes). Is this significant enough to incorporate into your summary? Summaries will never be completely objective since you have to choose what is important enough to include in them. However, your goal is to be as objective as possible.*

*Notice how this portion echoes the first paragraph and how both sections contain a significant amount of metaphors and imagery. The goal (and benefit) of a summary is to simplify and condense the language so that the reader understands the author's message without having read the original article.*

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## Summary and Synthesis

*Step 3: Create a brief outline and write your summary below.*



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**Checklist for an effective summary:**

- Did you identify the author and the title of the source you are summarizing?
- Is the summary written completely in your own words?
- Did you avoid quoting the author?
- Did you use language that is appropriate for a summary?
- Is your summary completely objective?
- Is your summary well organized?
- Will your reader get a complete sense of the material after reading your summary?

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### Exercise 2: Writing a Synthesis

Read the following excerpts carefully and develop a working thesis that connects them in some form. Keep in mind that the quotations below are not enough to fully support a thesis, and thus, this exercise is merely a beginning towards the process of writing a synthesis. The length of your working thesis, then, is flexible as it will change throughout the writing process.

Simons, Marlise. "A Talk with Gabriel García Márquez." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 5 Dec. 1982. Web. 24 June 2014.

"I have this great opportunity... I must try and break through the clichés about Latin America. Superpowers and other outsiders have fought over us for centuries in ways that have nothing to do with our problems. In reality we are all alone."

-Gabriel García Márquez, 1982

Martí, José. "Our America." *Martí: the Diplomat*. University of Pennsylvania, n.d. Web. 25 June 2014.

"What remains of the village in America must rouse itself... Nations that do not know one another should quickly become acquainted, as men who are to fight a common enemy. Those who shake their fists, like jealous brothers coveting the same tract of land, or like the modest cottager who envies the esquire his mansion, should clasp hands and become one. Those who use the authority of a criminal tradition to lop off the hands of their defeated brother with a sword stained with his own blood, ought to return the lands to the brother already punished sufficiently, if do not want the people to call them robbers."

-José Martí, "Our America," 1891

"Alliance for Progress (Alianza para el Progreso)." *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, n.d. Web. 24 June 2014.

"To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge – to convert our good words into good deeds—in a new alliance for progress – to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty."

-John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

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### Helpful Questions to Consider:

1. **Do you notice any connections between the titles of the sources you will be working on?** It is often helpful to read the titles before delving into the material itself, because you will likely be able to decipher what an article is about by its title.
2. **What do you already know about the U.S., Latin America, and their relations?** How will your understanding of the topic or lack of it affect your reading of the material?
3. **What connections can you draw between the articles?** Do the writers/speakers agree with each other or do they offer opposing viewpoints?
4. **What connections can you draw between the articles and your knowledge/perspective on the subject?** Do you agree or disagree with what is being said? How did your knowledge of the writers/speakers, or lack thereof, affect your reading of the material?
5. **Are your sources reliable?** In this case, the excerpts have already been chosen for you. However, it is also beneficial to consider any bias, if any, from the writers.
6. **How current are your articles?** In this particular exercise, you are working with a historical timeframe. However, it is also important to note when these sources were produced. The three excerpts above span a period of almost a hundred years. How does that affect your reading/perspective of the material?
7. **Do you need further research to support your thesis?** The information provided here is limited. If you were to write a paper on U.S.-Latin America relations, how would you go about expanding your research?



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Use the space below to outline and formulate your thesis and support.



A series of 20 horizontal lines for writing, with a large, faint watermark reading "Campus Academic Resource Program" and "SFS STATE" overlaid on the page.

### Checklist for an effective synthesis:

- Did you accomplish the purpose of the paper?
- Did you address possible counterarguments?
- Do you have enough research to fully support your arguments?
- Did you present your arguments in a cohesive manner?
- Do your arguments support your thesis?
- Did you cite your sources correctly within the text? Do you have a Reference page?

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