

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 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 distinctive and interesting argument or perspective.

A synthesis is not a summary. A synthesis is an opportunity to create valuable new knowledge out of already existing knowledge, i.e., other sources. You combine, or “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 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 climate change 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:

Create 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. If your essay shifts topic slightly, you can change your thesis in later drafts so that it matches your new focus.

Bellevue College does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, language, ethnicity, religion, veteran status, sex, sexual orientation, including gender identity or expression, disability, or age in its programs and activities. Please see policy 4150 at www.bellevuecollege.edu/policies/. The following people have been designated to handle inquiries regarding non-discrimination policies: Title IX Coordinator, 425-564-2641, Office C227, and EEOC/504 Compliance Officer, 425-564-2178, Office B126.

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, use only the most important parts of your research and the information that will best support your claim.

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

In the following synthesis essay, Laurie Hrydziuszko read one essay, then found various sources on the same topic (individuals with multicultural backgrounds struggling with societal labels) and used certain parts of those sources to support the thesis statement. The guiding ideas of the paper are highlighted in gray. Please note the essay has been revised and edited for instructional purposes. The original essay was formerly available at <https://www.msu.edu/user/carterca/hrydz.htm>.

Searching for an Identity in a Society Full of Labels

In the essay "It's Hard Enough Being Me," Anna Lisa Raya relates her experiences as a multicultural American at Columbia University and the confusion she felt about her identity. She grew up in L.A. and identified mostly with her Mexican background, but occasionally with her Puerto Rican background as well. Upon arriving in New York, however, she discovered that she was considered "Latina." She points out that a typical "Latina" must salsa dance, know Mexican history, and speak Spanish. Raya argues that she doesn't know any of these things and asks how this label could apply to her. She's caught between "selling-out" her heritage, and being a "spic" to Americans.¹ Anna Lisa Raya's essay provides insight into life for a multicultural American, how people of multicultural backgrounds handle the labels placed upon them, and the confusion in the attempt to find an identity. Searching for identity in a society that seeks to

¹ At the beginning, the writer introduces the Anna Lisa Raya's essay, which was the inspiration for this piece. Notice how she gives just enough summary to provide background information and spark interest on the topic. Specific details will come later in the essay.

label each individual is a difficult task, especially for people of multicultural ancestry, resolved only when people are comfortable with themselves.²

Since Raya's essay is from a multicultural author's viewpoint, it provides a more informative account than that of an outside observer. It would be harder to accept the viewpoint if the author were, for example, a white male writing about how a Mexican, Puerto Rican woman feels. As Connie Young Yu points out, observers often falsely perceive and report another group's experiences. Yu uses the example of white American historians writing about the lives of Chinese immigrants to show that there is no accurate account for the lives of the immigrants because they did not document their personal lives or feelings. The little information in history books only relates their obvious accomplishments (Yu 30).³ Unlike a history textbook, Raya's essay leaves the reader with an understanding of the feelings that multicultural people face every day. It thoroughly explains her initial belief that she was Mexican and sometimes Puerto Rican before discussing the outcome of her identity search: she is herself and not something to be categorized. Textbooks that group a people's accomplishments together without considering their individual identities and contributions can never convey such a personal conclusion.

The dilemma of trying to fit into a category is especially prevalent in multicultural individuals and increases their hardship because any one label cannot capture their entire identity. O'Brien's assertion that "biracial students are...forced to identify with one parent...over the other" backs up Raya's experience of considering herself one nationality or the other (Carter 3). When Raya was at home or with her friends, she identified as a Mexican because everyone else was as well. When she was with specific family members however, she recognized her Puerto Rican heritage to appease their image of her. I also have experienced having to denounce one nationality in support of the other depending on which family members I was with. In retrospect, my family's pressure to belong solely to a particular part of my ancestry was damaging to my self-image because it gave me the feeling that neither of my backgrounds was good enough to satisfy even my family. It was like they were forcing me to

² Her thesis is right at the end of her introduction. Note how it addresses specific aspects of multicultural identity – not the whole thing. Those specific aspects become the topic sentences for her body paragraphs.

³ Here, the writer has drawn upon an additional source to emphasize the argument of her paragraph. Following the quotation, she explains how it relates to her thesis.

deny one part of my identity. Being multicultural is like having a split personality because it forces individuals to identify with only a piece of themselves based ⁴ on their circumstances.

How people are viewed in this country versus how they are perceived in their ancestral country also causes multicultural people to feel caught between two cultures, belonging to neither. As Raya found out, if she didn't describe herself as a Latina, then she was a "sell-out" to her Hispanic heritage. In addition, no matter how hard she tried to fit in white American society, she was always labeled a "spic." Richard Rodriguez and Guillermo Gómez-Peña have also written about this problem for multicultural people in the search for identity. Rodriguez, an American-born Mexican, offers the anecdote of his aunt from Mexico City calling him a "pocho," a person who forgets about his heritage. To her, Rodriguez is a pocho because he stated that he was from "America," meaning the United States, and she rejects this view, explaining that America is a whole hemisphere (Rodriguez 34). Gómez-Peña, a Mexican who travels to and lives in the United States, identifies with whichever culture he is in. If he is in Mexico, then he is a Mexican. If he is in the United States, then he is a Chicano. The ironic twist is that in Mexico, other Mexicans see him as a Chicano because he has denied his Mexican heritage by going to America. Similarly, in the United States, Americans see him as another Mexican who has crossed the border (Gómez-Peña 23). For most people of multicultural heritage the differing labels between their country of origin and white American culture leave them caught in the middle of two or more cultures, not really belonging in any one place.

While multicultural people may be reluctant to tackle the misrepresentations of one label, all of these labels leave a lot of multicultural people at a loss for an identity to call their own, which is extremely confusing.⁵ As a Michigan State University student of multicultural heritage, Nikki O'Brien comments that "Students of mixed heritage sometimes let society categorize them" because of the pressure to fit in (Carter 3). Life is hard for all college students. Facing life away from home for the first time is enough of a challenge, but multicultural students must also confront questions of identity. Although multicultural students sometimes go along with how other people classify them to focus on concerns related to their education, Raya deals with the dilemmas of a new environment and finding herself at the same time. Another Michigan State student, Melani Saranillo, explains that she is comfortable with herself, but doesn't always know how to classify that self. She jokes, saying,

⁴ In the 2nd body paragraph, the writer combines ideas from 3 sources: Raya's initial essay, Nikki O'Brien, and her own personal experience. Doing so shows that the focus of this paper is NOT just to analyze Raya's essay, but to discover an idea found in multiple places.

⁵ Notice how Laurie uses key phrases from the main topic in Par. 3 to lead into the main topic of Par. 4. Using transitions such as these can make your writing much smoother.

"I'm just a mutt" (Carter 3). Trying to claim an identity involves a lot of factors that are subject to change. Nationality and culture, however, are permanent. Even if someone denies an aspect of their heritage, it remains and will at least indirectly affect their identity.

Trying to find an identity in a society full of labels is especially difficult for those with more than one component to their identity who don't fit neatly into one label. Raya and others conclude, however, that this whole dilemma boils down to an individual's ability to be oneself. No one will ever be simple enough to completely fit into a single group because each individual is a separate category unto themselves. Finding an identity is a personal struggle, and people should follow their hearts. Confusing labels never cover every aspect of an individual. Instead of trying to fit into society's categories, people should work harder to be comfortable as they are. As Anna Lisa Raya puts it simply, "Soy yo and no one else. Punto." Meaning, I am myself. Period.

Works Cited

- Carter, Kelly L. "Group Combats Multicultural Issues." *State News*, 9 Oct. 1996, p. 3.
- Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. "A Binational Performance Pilgrimage." *Drama Review*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1991, pp. 22-45.
- Raya, Anna Lisa. "It's Hard Enough Being Me." *Inventing America: Readings in Identity and Culture*, edited by Nancy Lyman, St. Martin's, 1996, pp. 219-221.
- Rodriguez, Richard. "Go North, Young Man." *Mother Jones*, July/Aug. 1995, pp. 31-35.
- Yu, Connie Young. "The World of Our Grandmothers." *Inventing America: Readings in Identity and Culture*, edited by Nancy Lyman, St. Martin's, 1996, pp. 30-37.

Handout written by Sean Allen