#25) Explanatory Synthesis

The purpose of this handout is to describe briefly the purpose of the explanatory synthesis essay and to provide you with some writing suggestions.

**What is in an explanatory synthesis?**

Explanatory synthesis assignments usually involve the use of two or more sources, all written on the same topic. As Behrens and Rosen point out, “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” (106). Not only do you explain the positions presented in your sources—you also synthesize by identifying important connections between the major ideas covered in your sources.

**How do I prepare to organize and write?**

In many synthesis assignments, the instructor selects the readings. Perhaps you are assigned three articles on TV violence. Each author may take a different approach to the topic of violence on television and may not comment directly on the other articles. But all three authors might discuss the subtopic (also called criterion, meaning a specific point addressed by several sources) of whether or not TV violence negatively affects children. Thus, you could write a paragraph explaining the similarities and differences between the authors’ viewpoints on children and TV violence. This paragraph could be organized as follows:

- **a.** Topic Sentence identifying the subtopic (how violent TV content affects children)
- **b.** Author A’s viewpoint
- **c.** Author B’s viewpoint
- **d.** Author C’s viewpoint

Depending on your assignment instructions, you probably will need to include 2-4 subtopics in your paper. The second major subtopic you identify might only be discussed by two of the authors—that’s okay. Once you have identified the subtopics, the authors’ opinions you will synthesize in each section, and the order in which you will organize your paper, you can make a quick outline. You may 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 complement one another more effectively. The outline for your body paragraphs might be similar to the following:

- **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 B’s view of the subtopic
   c. Source C’s view of the subtopic

However, as Stephen Wilhoit points out, “your job in writing an [explanatory] synthesis involves more than summarizing what each critic has to say” (159). When you write the paper, you will synthesize by pointing out important similarities and differences among the views in your sources.

How do I introduce and conclude my essay?
After you have drafted the body paragraphs, you should draft an introductory paragraph that introduces the topic, sources, and the debate. Your instructor will ask you to include a thesis statement. In most argumentative assignments, your thesis statement presents the major claim of your writing. However, because your purpose in this assignment is an objective presentation of others’ arguments, your thesis statement should identify the topic under debate and any major similarities or differences in the opinions of your sources. For example, if you were working with the articles about TV violence, your thesis might read as follows:

Although the psychologists concede that television violence is on the rise, they disagree about the seriousness of its potential effects on children, adults, and individuals especially prone to violent behavior.

To introduce your readers to the particular subtopics you focus on in your essay, your instructor may ask you to include an essay map. The sample thesis sentence above includes such an essay map. On the other hand, you may write a thesis statement in one sentence and an essay map in another:

Psychologists concede that television violence is on the rise, but they disagree about the seriousness of the problem. In particular, experts debate television’s effect on children, adults, and individuals especially prone to violent behavior.

A conclusion for this essay may simply recap the main points of the discussion and briefly revisit the authors’ viewpoints. Avoid repeating yourself too much. Depending on your instructor’s guidelines, you may also want to comment on the importance of the issue.

Be sure to read carefully your instructor’s guidelines for the introduction and conclusion. Assignments vary by professor, and some may use a comparison-contrast synthesis as a model. However, Behrens and Rosen state that “comparison and contrast is frequently not an end in itself but serves some larger purpose” (98). In an explanatory synthesis, you should not just compare and contrast the sources, but explain their positions fully without taking a side in the debate.

Works Cited