

Essay 1: Synthesis

“Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion... [...] You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument, then you put in your oar.”

(Kenneth Burke, qtd. in Harris’s Rewriting, 34)

Purpose: Explore one issue arising from our readings by synthesizing three texts—two of our readings and one outside source. Enter the “conversation” going on among these texts by offering your analysis of their ideas, and raising your own critical observations and questions about the issue itself.

Audience: Assume you are writing to an academic audience who may or may not have read your sources (this would include your classmates, the instructor, and other scholars, thinkers, or students).

Format: formal academic essay (minimum five full pages in length), see below for details

USE THE WRITING CENTER * GET EXTRA CREDIT.
Make your appointment a week in advance—it gets busy.

Final Draft Due: February 17th

Grading: 20% of course grade

Choosing a Topic. You will need to identify a problem, conflict, or social issue that has come up in our readings, film clips, or conversations. This issue must be systemic enough for you to generalize (i.e. “Katrina reveals a national ignorance toward the poor”, but not so general that it’s obvious or unworthy of a detailed analysis (i.e. “poverty exists in America”). Imagine yourself in Burke’s parlor (see quote, above) with the authors and perhaps the subjects of these texts; what thread of the conversation do you want to join in on? Naming this issue and its importance should become your essay’s main idea, or thesis.

Selecting Texts. Choose your two texts from the assigned readings & film clips. These include Kelman, Bush, Ebert, Lee, National Geographic film & Levees.org film. You have to locate one or two outside sources to help you frame, illustrate, or complicate the issue you’ve identified. This source should serve as yet another voice in the conversation about the issue, and should bring some new or critical perspective. Outside sources can range from news articles to scholarly essays, but must be carefully chosen based on the source’s reliability, credibility, relevance, and timeliness.

Working with sources in the essay. After you’ve briefly outlined the issue, and any background info, analyze it in closer detail by choosing specific moments and quotations from the three-four texts to expound upon. Make sure to juxtapose the sources, or make connections across or among the details you’ve chosen. You will do this in order to highlight similarities, different perspectives, and complications each text brings up in relation to the problem. In other words, show how these details from these sources relate to each other and to the problem. This is called synthesis. Use the sources to explain and illustrate the problem, but then spend considerable time analyzing the problem and the way authors have discussed it.

[OVER]

Analyzing and making claims. The primary goal in this paper is to analyze the issue at hand—thus, you might examine the a) patterns you notice across texts discussing this issue, b) conflicts or important oppositions, c) the future implications and consequences of the details you’ve chosen, or d) things that just don’t seem to fit or have yet to be addressed in the context of the larger conversation. Analysis will lead you to make claims—you should draw conclusions as you arrive at them throughout your analysis.

Complicating the issue. Finally, conclude your essay by raising a series of urgent, critical questions that respond to and/or complicate your analysis, demanding further inquiry. In your conclusion, explain why your questions are important and should be considered.

Formatting your paper. Your paper should be carefully edited for clarity, follow MLA format (headings, spacing, margins, titles, citations, etc.), and include a complete Works Cited page. Please make sure to use a 10-12 inch, reader-friendly font. The length requirement is 5-7 pages.

Here are some topic ideas taken from former student essays:

- the idea or realization that the poor were disregarded before the storm even hit
- Katrina was a natural, political and social disaster all rolled into one
- the delayed response from the government
- the role of blame in a natural disaster
- was the response to Katrina related to race and class
- the government’s expectations of the citizens in a disaster
- lack of communication between the levels of government
- powerful figures in society having their own agenda after a disaster
- lack of good timing by local and federal government affected evacuation