Teaching Students to Synthesize Reading Materials
Definition

According to Shannon Bumgarner:
“Synthesizing is the process whereby a student merges new information with prior knowledge to form a new idea, perspective, or opinion or to generate insight.”

Therefore, synthesis is an ongoing process. As new knowledge is acquired, it is synthesized with prior knowledge to generate new ideas.
Skills Needed to Synthesize

• Summarize and paraphrase
• Make accurate inferences
• Recognize author’s purpose and tone
• Recognize author’s tone
• Understand author’s perspective and/or bias
• Determine the validity and reliability of information
Synthesizing Skills

• “Synthesizing is the most complex of the reading strategies. Synthesizing lies on a continuum of evolving thinking. Synthesizing runs the gamut from taking stock of meaning while reading to achieving new insight. Introducing the strategy of synthesizing in reading then primarily involves teaching the reader to stop every so often and think about what he or she has read” (Strategies That Work).
Explaining with Metaphors

Synthesizing can be compared to a journey. The student begins with prior knowledge of a topic, gains new knowledge about that topic from a variety of sources, combines and analyzes this information, and as a final destination, makes an evaluation and forms an opinion.
Puzzle Metaphor

Another way to view synthesizing is to look at it as putting the pieces of a puzzle together. The student collects the pieces of information from various sources and finds connections to put together the entire picture.
Building Upon Prior Knowledge

- Since newly acquired information should be synthesized with previously learned information, faculty can assist in this ongoing process by activating students’ prior knowledge of each new topic being introduced in the classroom.
- At the start of the lesson, ask students to write down what they already know about that topic before they begin reading.
- Then, have students make connections as they read using a synthesis journal or graphic organizer.
Caution!

- McAlexander and Burrell warn: “Synthesis is a complex process” and “it will need to be modeled by the teacher beforehand.”
**Graphic Organizer**

### Key Concept Synthesis

**Directions:** Use the following graphic organizer to identify the five most important concepts (in the form of single words or phrases) from the reading. Think about identifying the five most important concepts this way: If you had to explain the reading to someone who had not read the text, what are the five most important concepts you would want them to understand? Use a highlighter and marginal notes to identify important concepts as you read, and then complete the graphic organizer once you have completed the reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Key Concepts (with page #s)</th>
<th>Put the Concept in Your Own Words</th>
<th>Explain Why the Concept is Important &amp; Make Connections to Other Concepts</th>
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Conclusion

• Teachers of any discipline can aid students in synthesizing information by having them use a graphic organizer or a synthesis journal. Students will be more likely to effectively utilize these techniques if they are first modeled by the instructor.

• Finally, by activating prior knowledge on the topic, guiding the student in comparing and contrasting information, and assisting the student in separating fact from opinion, Teachers can steer students toward making judgments, forming opinions, and drawing logical conclusions.
Sources
