

# Writing the Synthesis Essay 16

**S**ynthesis is the process of incorporating information from two or more sources to create a written text based on a thesis statement developed by thoughtful analysis and interpretation of the source materials. A synthesis essay is the end product of synthesis. A synthesis essay may be informative, argumentative, or analytical.

How do you decide what to include and what to discard as you synthesize? Your best bet is to look for shared themes, ideas, trends, words, and images in the source materials. As you read the source materials, make a list of the key points of each source; vertical lists will make it easy for you to compare the items you have listed. After you have finished reading and making your lists, compare the items to identify key points that the source materials have in common. After you've identified these "points in common," give some thought to what they represent and to possible relationships these points in common have. Do they suggest a new theory or hypothesis? If the points in common suggest a new theory or idea, you should be able to create an original thesis statement from them. Your new original thesis statement can then be supported with information from the source materials you used.

Another way to approach the idea of synthesis is by using a Venn diagram. The Venn diagram presented here includes two overlapping circles, each of which represents a separate source. The overlapping space represents the points in common between the two sources.

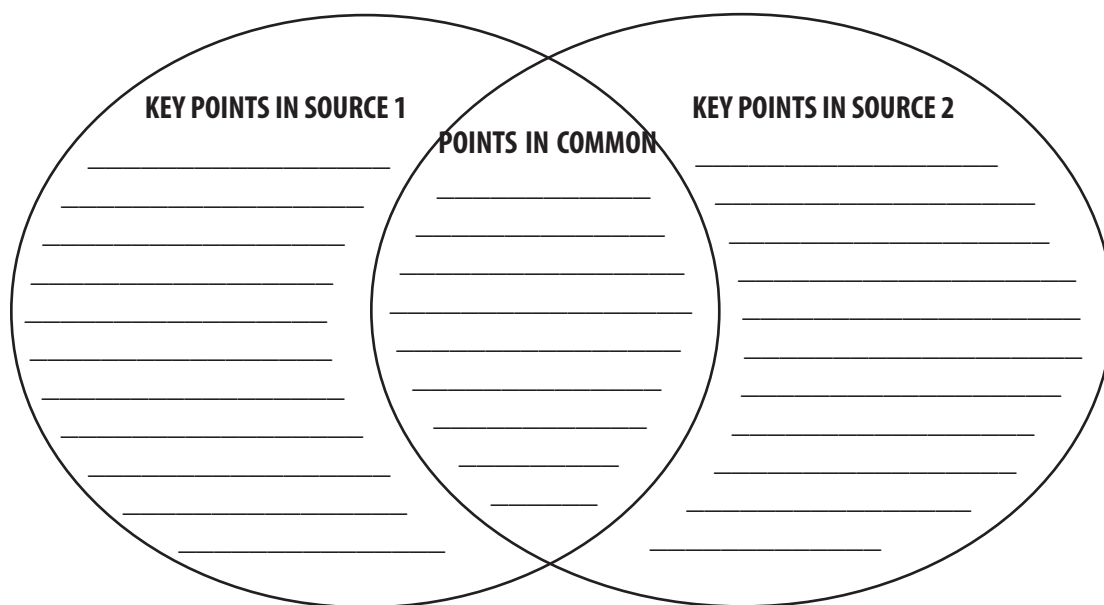


Figure 11 The Venn diagram can be used to develop a synthesis essay.

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Using the two short sample essays below, we shall first identify the themes and ideas in each essay and list them in each of the circles in our Venn diagram. In the second step, we shall analyze the points in common from each list and jot them down in the overlapping space within the two circles. From there, in the third step we will create a simple summary statement that embodies the information within the points in common. The fourth step we'll take is to explore the possibility of new theories or hypotheses that might emerge from this summary statement of the points in common. Finally, in the fifth step, we will incorporate some of the points in common to create a new thesis statement that will serve as the basis of our synthesis essay.

### ESSAY 1

#### Serendipity takes a beach by storm

By Edward Bacon, *Hatteras Observer*, July 7, 2008

Living in a dream house next to the ocean can be a mixed blessing. The 2008 movie "Night in Rodanthe" was filmed in a three-story rental house called Serendipity on Hatteras Island, North Carolina. The house was selected because of its beautiful views and its location on a barren stretch of beach next to the blue-blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The movie tells the story of a man and a woman's romantic relationship at an isolated bed-and-breakfast inn on a beach during a violent storm.

Built in 1988, the rustic beach cottage valued at about \$400,000 has been acquired and reacquired by people optimistic that their beachfront dream house would survive the forces of nature. The house is positioned on pilings sunk fourteen feet into the beach sand, which makes it fairly stable in terms of construction. The view of the ocean is idyllic and ever changing. Nonetheless, the effect of the natural elements on the property has been costly. Storms, hurricanes, and the unrelenting tides have broken windows, decks, and doors, and most recently, flooded the septic system with sand. Originally located about four hundred feet from the ocean, today the house stands about forty feet from the shoreline.

The house, one of several rental properties along Hatteras Island, rents for nearly \$4,000 a week during the summer months, which makes it a profitable venture for its owners in Pennsylvania. The owners say it's a popular place and they don't have trouble keeping it rented out, except when there are problems related to storm and tidal damage. The owners have repaired the property numerous times.

Warner Bros., the company that made the movie that starred Diane Lane and Richard Gere, paid a couple of months' rent to use the location as a set. Fake trees were hauled in and "planted" to modify the beach's appearance; many scenes were filmed at a Wilmington, N.C., studio designed to look like the house's interior. A storm that occurred at Hatteras Island while filming battered the shutters and pushed tides underneath the house – a situation that filmmakers described as serendipitous because the stormy conditions added authenticity to the film.

ESSAY 2

Ike kicks up sand, surf in the Gulf

By Jake Taylor, *Gulf Coast Digest*, November 12, 2008

Hurricane Ike in 2008 may not have ruffled the headlines the way Hurricane Katrina did in 2005, but Ike’s consequences should be taken every bit as seriously.

Hurricane Ike ripped through the Gulf of Mexico over a period of several days, leaving in its wake \$31.5 billion in damages and destruction to homes and businesses in Texas, Louisiana, Cuba, and the Bahamas. People returning to coastal Galveston, Texas, ten days after the storm found wholesale destruction of their homes and stores, of everything they had ever valued – rain-soaked walls had rotted and were collapsing; furniture and belongings were ruined; and water, electricity, gas and sewer service were not working. The bloated bodies of dead animals putrefied in the heat, and people were advised to get tetanus shots before attempting to do any cleanup. Utilities were compromised, with no hint of how quickly they would be restored.

Ike roared ashore like a bully kicking sand in the faces of millions. Despite efforts to protect property by applying shutters to protect windows and moving boats to safer locations, Ike’s winds and rains pounded buildings and boats into splinters. Residents of Ike-battered neighborhoods are still waiting months after the storm for aid from the government to help them begin cleaning up the mess. Concerned Texas scientists have said that the quality of Gulf coastal waters and shorelines, already damaged by environmental pressures created by residential and petroleum industry development, will further deteriorate as a result of Ike.

Cuban officials said the storm adversely affected the nation’s sugar and coffee industries; in the Bahamas, utility crews were sent to restore electrical service.

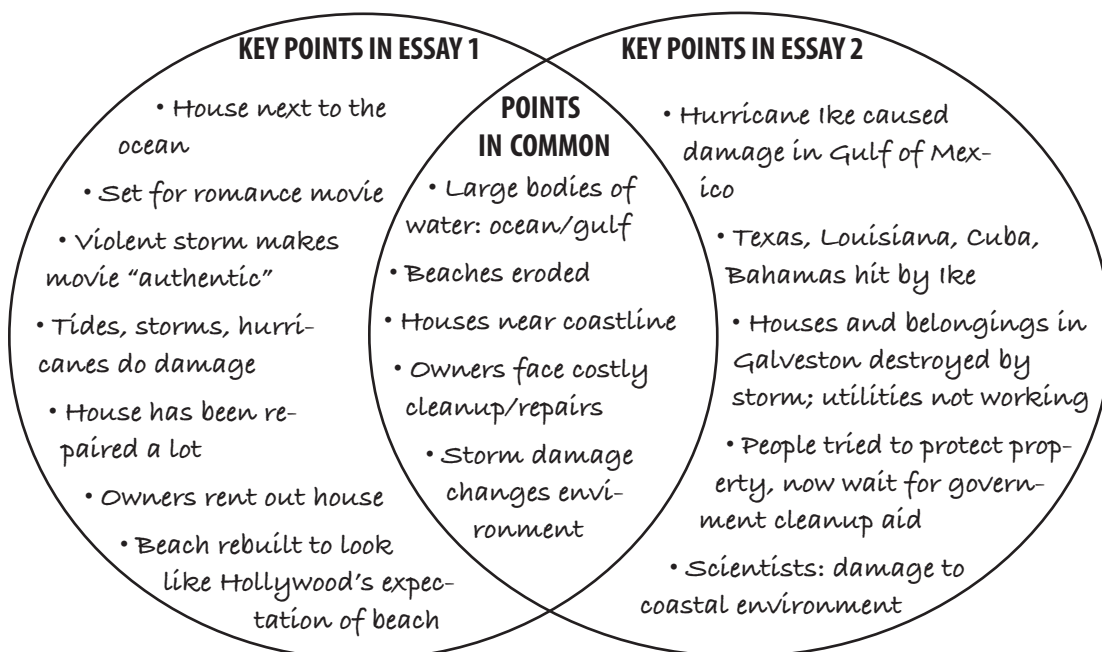


Figure 12 The Venn diagram has been used to identify key points in Essays 1 and 2, and the points in common.

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The summary statement should not be confused with a thesis statement. The summary statement provides an objective statement about the points in common, encapsulating as many of the ideas as possible. A summary statement that encapsulates the ideas within the points in common of your Venn diagram about the Serendipity house and Hurricane Ike might state: “Property located near large bodies of water suffers costly damage due to storms, tides, and hurricanes” OR “People living in houses along coastlines face the possibility of damage, loss, and costly repairs to their property because of storms and hurricanes” OR “People who own houses in hurricane-prone areas gamble with their lives, property, money, and time.”

From your summary statement, you can develop a more pointed, subjective thesis statement that represents the stance you intend to take in your new essay. A possible thesis statement developed from the Venn diagram lists could be: “People who own property along hurricane-prone coastlines should be prepared for the genuine, life-threatening risks that accompany all that idyllic beauty.” From here you can go on to develop your own essay based on your new thesis statement, supporting your thesis with information from the two source essays. Support doesn’t have to include every point you identified in each source essay; it does have to relate to your thesis.

Do you see how identifying the key points in each source and then identifying the points the two sources share in common help you to look at the source materials from a fresh perspective? As you identify the key points and then the points in common in your sources, you are essentially stripping out extraneous words and information. As you reduce the number of unnecessary words, you trim the bulk of the original essays down to a more manageable amount of information. The trimming process allows your focus to shift from a large glob of information in two sources to a single list with just the points significant to both sources. Identifying the points in common has lessened the bulk or density of the original information, which should translate to a sense of freedom so you can identify and analyze the points in common in a new way.

By working with just the points-in-common list, you are free to consider new words, images, and analogies relating to the points in common. Brainstorm. Mind-map. Use your critical thinking skills. Does this list of points in common remind you of anything? Can you draw any parallels between your list of points in common and any other subject about which you know something? When you think of the points in common, do you think of anything else that you can relate to them? What would you have to do if you wanted to tell a friend about a new theory you have developed as a result of reading these two essays? Would you identify the things in common between these two essays in order to explain your theory? Would you explain what your theory reminds you of, within the context of these two essays? Would you provide examples from each essay to support your theory?

This is all part of the process of synthesis – creating a unique new idea (thesis) from the ideas and information of other sources and then organizing the ideas and information in an analytical and interpretative way. It forms the foundation of many different types of college writing including the informative and argumentative essays.

### **Structuring the synthesis essay**

On the next four pages you will find a graphic organizer and model of a synthesis essay based on two sources. The more sources you use, the more complex your structure will be.

**Hook** – Opening with an interesting anecdote, quote, fact, example, or idea about the sources you’re analyzing should lead the reader into the **thesis statement**. The thesis statement is a **debatable** or **provable** claim about the content of the source texts. Do not create or use a summary statement.

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**Background Analysis** – This paragraph should provide background information about the source material texts, including title, author, date of publication, and possible purpose of original texts. Additional information that tells your reader why this topic is important or why you are raising the issue will help your reader connect with your topic.

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**First point** – This point will be drawn from your points in common list and recast as a topic sentence supported with analysis by you and evidence from the original source texts. Don’t just list quotes and examples. Interpret and analyze the source materials to support your thesis.

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**Second point** – This point will also be drawn from your points in common list and recast as a topic sentence supported with analysis by you and evidence from the original source texts. Don’t just list quotes and examples. Interpret and analyze the source materials to support your thesis.

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**Third point** – This point will also be drawn from your points in common list and recast as a topic sentence supported with analysis by you and evidence from the original source texts. Don’t just list quotes and examples. Interpret and analyze the source materials to support your thesis.

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You may have more than three points to interpret, analyze, and prove. These additional points will be presented similarly to the first, second, and third points.

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**Conclusion** - Tie the points you have identified in your body paragraphs to a re-statement of your thesis statement.

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**Bibliography**

### SAMPLE SYNTHESIS ESSAY

Every Student

Professor Smythe-Jenkins

English 100

January 15, 2009

#### Beachfront Blues: Living Close to the Water Can Be Dangerous

Hollywood may try to convince viewers that a storm is just another reason to get cozy in an oceanfront dream house, but survivors of Hurricane Ike know the real story: people who own property along hurricane-prone coastlines need to be prepared for the genuine, life-threatening risks that accompany all that idyllic beauty.

Two recent articles about storms and hurricanes bring this issue to life. “Serendipity takes a beach by storm” was written by Edward Bacon in the *Hatteras Observer* in July 2008, just a few weeks before hurricane season started. Jake Taylor of the *Gulf Coast Digest* wrote “Ike kicks up sand in the Gulf” in November, after hurricane season was over and the damage was done. The articles capture the very different perspectives of people in the eye of the storm.

When Warner Bros. rented an eclectic oceanfront house called Serendipity on a beach in North Carolina for a movie set, they brought in trees and “planted” them to make the location look more real (Ward). They paid the house owners a few thousand dollars to rent the place for a couple of months, then recreated the house’s interior in a film studio in Wilmington, N.

Caro., and put actors Diane Lane and Richard Gere together to make romantic movie magic (Bacon). When a real storm blew in, the film crew was excited for the touch of “authenticity” (Bacon) that the rains and wind gave to the movie.

Meanwhile, along the Gulf Coast, residents of Texas and Louisiana were fighting for their lives against the hundred-mile-an-hour winds and torrential rains of Hurricane Ike. The storm ripped through the coastal area in September (Taylor), destroying buildings and boats and changing some people’s lives forever. When people returned to their homes, they discovered incredible damage and losses that would take months to repair and restore (Taylor).

Warner Bros. wasn’t at Hatteras Island to do a documentary, but the movie company could have been more honest about nature’s impact on the setting. In reality, the house is located on a “barren stretch of beach” (Bacon) about “forty feet from the shoreline” (Bacon). When the house was built twenty years ago, the distance between house and ocean’s edge was four hundred feet. The owners of the house that is rented to tourists have experienced many “problems related to storm and tidal damage” (Bacon). The wooden structure has lost windows and doors, decks have been damaged, and the house’s septic sewer system was ruined when sand flooded it (Bacon). The owners have spent lots of money to make repairs.

On the other hand, the owners of houses and businesses in Galveston, Texas, faced very real wholesale destruction of their property. Walls were “collapsing” (Taylor), personal belongings were water-soaked, and utilities that could have been useful for cleanup would not be working in the foreseeable future. There is concern that the hurricane has damaged the coastal ecosystem, as well (Taylor). The impact on people’s lives was hardly romantic as they scrambled to restore what they had lost. Many people are still waiting for the federal government to provide financial assistance and shelter to those who lost everything to Ike.

Ocean storms, tides, and hurricanes are powerful threats to everyday life, causing billions of dollars of damage. The damage can be physical, trashing houses, businesses, and utilities. It can be environmental, wiping out beaches and flooding wetlands areas to the extent that habitat and wildlife are destroyed. It can also be psychological, when people who lose their homes and property have to relocate or start over to re-establish their lives. Bacon states that Hollywood’s take on a storm that roars onto a movie set is “serendipitous” because it

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adds authenticity. Taylor says residents are still waiting three months after the storm for government assistance to help with cleanup – a not-so-subtle conclusion that being in a beautiful place at the right time was hardly good fortune for the residents of Texas, Louisiana, Cuba, and the Bahamas.

By depicting the storm-damaged house as romantic and idyllic, and by shooting scenes for the movie in a location five hours away from the real house, the film studio was deceptive in its depiction of setting. That in turn created a false notion of romance – distorting the reality and risk of romance (and oceanfront beach houses) for a lot of moviegoers.

Ocean coastlines offer tourists and residents a welcome glimpse of beauty and serenity when the water and skies are calm. When the winds start to pick up, it's a different story altogether. Storms can pose threats can destroy property and life; that's especially true in places where hurricanes happen. While a good storm might be Hollywood's notion of a tension-building prelude to a night of movie romance, people in the path of a real hurricane probably think they're getting top billing in the latest disaster flick.

### Works Cited

- Bacon, Edward. "Serendipity takes a beach by storm." *Hatteras Observer*. 7 July 2008: 5.
- Taylor, Jake. "Ike kicks up sand in the Gulf." *Gulf Coast Digest*. 12 Nov. 2008: A3.