



Session

CRITICAL THINKING AND SYNTHESIS

At the end of this session, international students will:

- Be able to examine a topic from a range of different perspectives drawn from readings, and identify disparities or commonalities between the perspectives
- Have practice in working in groups to identify and recombine ideas
- Be able to write a short synthesis, which combines ideas from various sources to focus on a particular question.

How and when to use this material

This session enables students to practise examining an issue or phenomenon from multiple angles (informed by readings) and then to combine these into a short written text that focuses on a particular topic, question, or an upcoming assignment.

Example readings are provided for students to work through, but the ideal way to run this Session is to modify it to suit an upcoming assignment and relevant course readings that students are already working on within their program of study.

Details of how to extend or condense this Session are provided at the end of the document.

If the Session is being run within a pre-session course, it can be adapted and simplified by running the exercise without readings and asking students instead to draw on their own knowledge of different viewpoints with which they are familiar, such as those of a variety of consumer stakeholders towards a popular brand.

The Session builds on Sessions in **Academic writing**, and **Critical thinking and argumentation**, and **Connecting theory and practice**, and leads into **Organising and writing an essay**. Lecturers may wish to use the Session **Organising ideas through summary and synopsis** in advance of this session.

CRITICAL THINKING AND SYNTHESIS

<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

The following Briefing Notes may be useful in providing information around this topic area:

- **Critical and creative thinking, and asking questions**
- **Why Chinese postgraduate students struggle with listening, speaking, reading and writing in English**

Introduction

The skills of synthesising are necessary in any written work requiring critical analysis of issues or phenomena related to media and communication. Because undergraduate degrees in China require students on the whole to concentrate their reading on a single textbook for each course, Chinese students are relatively unfamiliar with the notion of drawing on academic ideas from a range of sources in order to examine a topic from multiple perspectives, and then synthesise these into a persuasive argument. Most students, whether local or international, often become confused between summarising ideas and combining them in a synthesis.

Pre-reading and preparation: In advance of this Session, put students into groups of three and give each student one of three readings, asking them to jot down the key ideas (main points of the arguments and also examples) and bring them to class. If linking the Session to an upcoming assignment, ensure that the readings are central to an assignment they are currently working on, and ideally are ones that have previously been discussed in class so that students are already familiar with them.

Example readings: Ask students to read one of the following three short texts, ensuring that each person is reading something different.

Kent, M. 2013. Using social media dialogically: Public relations role in reviving democracy. *Public Relations Review*, 39 (4), 337-345

Halliday, J. 2014. US Airways apologises for posting pornographic image on Twitter. *The Guardian*, 15 April, available from <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/apr/15/us-airways-apologises-posting-pornographic-image-twitter>

Dredge, S. 2014. Can the US gun lobby be made to misfire through social media? *The Guardian*, 9 March, available from <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/mar/08/us-gun-lobby-social-media-nra>

Lecturer input

Before beginning the activity:

Remind students that academic writing requires writers to consider and present a variety of different perspectives (or viewpoints or angles) on a topic. It is not sufficient to present solely your own point of view. You need to consider what others have said about the issue you are focusing on in order to show your reader the context of your argument and how you developed your particular stance on a topic. Introduce students to the importance of combining ideas from multiple, credible sources to develop a particular stance. Highlight the difference between academic and other sources, such as news media and corporate reports.

Remind students of the difference between a summary and a synthesis. See attached Slide: **Difference between summary and synthesis**, and also the Session on **Organising ideas through summary and synopsis**.

Summary	Synthesis
Re-iterates the information	Combines and contrasts information from different sources.
Shows what the original authors wrote.	Not only reflects your knowledge about what the original authors wrote, but also creates something new out of two or more pieces of writing.

Adapted from: Eaton, S. E. (2010)

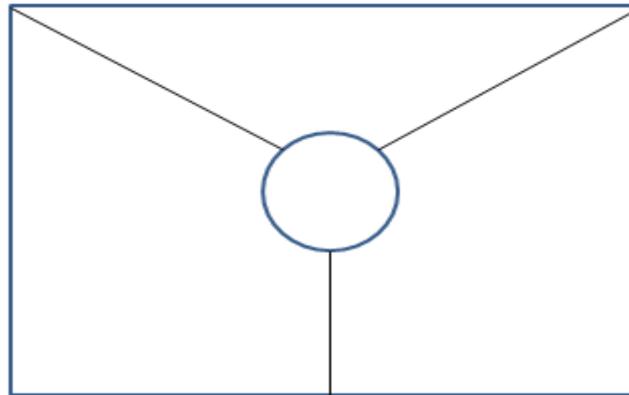
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/38175256/Differences-Between-Summarizing-and-Synthesizing-Information>

Student activity: Examining a topic from multiple angles

- The lecturer to place students in the same groups of three that were identified in advance of the session, and give them a few minutes to re-read the notes they made on their readings.
- While students are reading, the lecturer should write the following question on whiteboard:

To what extent is social media a valuable tool for strengthening relationships with key stakeholders?

- Give each group an A3 sheet, onto which they should draw lines to divide the paper into three with a large blank circle in the centre.



- Standing around the paper, each student to take a different box and write bullet points of the key aspects of their reading (i.e. main arguments or observations or examples). After writing, explain the points to their colleagues.
- At this point – but not before – the lecturer to instruct students to combine and contrast the information from the three different sources and write this in bullet point form in the centre circle. This might include any common or different ideas, themes or examples.
- Individually, students should now write a short paragraph based on the points in the centre circle, and focused on the question:

To what extent is social media a valuable tool for strengthening relationships with key stakeholders?

- To do this effectively, students should:
 - Start with a topic sentence which responds to the question, such as: 'There are a variety of views about the value of social media as a tool for engaging with corporate stakeholders.'
 - Explain each bullet point in the centre circle (including relevant references).
 - Link sentences using connecting words and phrases such as: 'in addition ...', 'in contrast', 'similarly', 'therefore', etc.
- Display the completed paragraphs on the walls around the room and have students walk around, read each one and vote for the best.

Lecturer input: summary

Remind students of the difference between a summary (in the boxes) and a synthesis (in the centre circle) which not only combines and contrasts information, but also creates new knowledge based on students' own interpretation of the information from the three sources and their conclusions.

Highlight that the ability to synthesise is a core skill in critical thinking and important in academic writing and argumentation.

Note to lecturer

To extend the activity, the lecturer might draw attention to the marking criteria for a forthcoming assignment, noting how it encompasses elements of effective synthesis, argument and English expression. This is a good way to get students to start thinking about how marking criteria can pinpoint what is important in written assignments, including the need to read widely and incorporate this thinking, through synthesis, into written work. The connection between marking criteria, the content of assignments, and lecturers' feedback may be novel to many Chinese students as it is rare for marking criteria to be made explicit in relation to assessed work in Chinese universities.

To condense the activity, disregard the section where students individually write a paragraph. Instead, display the groups' A3 sheets, with their completed bullet points, around the room for everyone to read. Select two or three good groups to stand next to their A3 displays and orally present the ideas from their centre circles. Summarise by talking the issues in the above Session summary.



Produced for the project
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Additional materials and resources are available from
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

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