

Sample Reflection: Informative Synthesis Essay Student Letter

Great Student
gstuden456@my.epcc.edu
720-741-8523
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Professor Kelli Wood
9570 Gateway Blvd. North
El Paso, TX 79924

Dear Professor Wood,

Writing my informative synthesis essay on parasocial relationships was definitely the most challenging essay I've written so far this semester. Unlike the emblematic essay where I was writing about my own experience, this time I had to become an expert on something I barely knew about and then help my readers understand it too.

What Went Well: I'm really proud of how I learned to integrate sources effectively. In my first draft, I was just dropping in quotes without really connecting them to my own points. But after our conference, I started using more signal phrases and explaining how each source supported my main ideas. For example, when I wrote about the COVID-19 impact on parasocial relationships, I was able to connect the Wolfinger statistics about OnlyFans searches to the broader point about increased accessibility during lockdown.

The prewriting assignments were incredibly helpful, especially Prewriting 2 where we had to find connections between sources. That's when I realized that all my sources were basically saying the same thing: parasocial relationships aren't automatically good or bad, but depend on the individual and the intensity of the relationship. That became my main organizing principle.

I think I did a good job explaining deeper psychological concepts in more understandable language. Terms like "parasocial relationship" and "borderline psychopathology" could easily confuse readers, so I made sure to define everything clearly and use examples that people could relate to, like having a celebrity crush or feeling attached to TV characters.

My organization improved a lot through revision. I started with a scattered mess of information, but I eventually organized it chronologically (how parasocial relationships evolved with technology) and then by types and impacts. This helped readers follow my logic better.

What Was Challenging: The biggest challenge was synthesis. I kept writing what felt like separate book reports on each source instead of weaving them together to create new understanding. It took me several drafts to figure out how to use multiple sources to support the same point rather than dedicating a paragraph to each source.

Finding credible sources was harder than I expected. A lot of websites about parasocial relationships were just opinion pieces or clickbait articles. I had to learn to evaluate sources more carefully and look for actual research or expert credentials. The Cleveland Clinic and Resilience Lab sources took forever to find, but they were much more reliable than the random psychology blogs I started with.

I also struggled with maintaining an informative tone rather than slipping into argument. Sometimes I would start writing things like "social media is clearly harmful" instead of presenting different perspectives neutrally. I had to keep reminding myself that my job was to inform, not persuade.

Another challenge was length. I had so much information that my first draft was way too long, but then when I cut it down, I worried I wasn't being thorough enough. Finding the right balance between full coverage and readable length was tricky.

What Helped Me Work Through Difficulties: The librarian session was invaluable. I learned to use better search terms and how to evaluate sources using the CRAAP test. That saved me hours of sifting through unreliable websites.

Our peer review session really helped with synthesis. When Marcus read my draft and said "I feel like you're telling me about five different topics instead of one topic with multiple angles," that was a lightbulb moment. I realized I needed stronger transitions and clearer connections between my main points.

I also found it helpful to create a visual outline where I color-coded which sources supported which main points. That helped me see where I was relying too heavily on one source or where I needed more evidence.

The writing center tutor helped me work on my introduction and conclusion. My first introduction just jumped right into defining parasocial relationships without any engaging hook, and my conclusion was basically just restating my thesis. She helped me think about why readers should care about this topic and what they should take away from it.

Plans for Improvement: For the argument essay, I want to start with a clearer thesis from the beginning. I think I spent too much time in the research phase without a clear direction, which made the writing process longer and more confusing than it needed to be.

I also want to get better at taking notes while I research. I kept having to go back and re-read sources because I hadn't recorded enough detail about specific examples or statistics the first time through.

I plan to use more diverse source types in my argument essay. All of my sources for this essay were articles or studies, but I think incorporating different perspectives like interviews or case studies might make my writing more engaging.

One practical change I'll make is to start drafting earlier. I spent so much time researching that I didn't leave enough time for multiple revisions. If I can get a rough draft done earlier, I'll have more time to focus on improving the writing itself rather than just trying to get all the information down.

I also want to work on my conclusions. I tend to just summarize what I've already said rather than helping readers understand why this information matters or what they should do with it.

This essay taught me that writing to inform is just as challenging as writing to persuade, maybe even more so because you have to present complex information clearly without taking sides. I also learned that research is an ongoing process throughout the writing, not just something you do before you start drafting. I kept finding new connections between sources as I wrote, which actually made my essay stronger.

I'm looking forward to the argument essay because I'll get to take a stance on an issue, but I know the skills I developed in this essay—especially source integration and synthesis—will be crucial for making a compelling argument.

Thank you for all the feedback throughout this process. The multiple draft requirement really helped me understand that good writing takes time and revision.

Sincerely,
Great Student

AI Disclosure: I used Claude to help me understand the differences between synthesis and summary when I was struggling with that concept. I also asked it to suggest better transition phrases when my writing felt choppy. All the research, analysis, and conclusions are my own work.

Rubric Feedback for Informative Synthesis Reflection

Criteria	Performance Level & Description	Explanation
Depth of Self-Analysis	Advanced (A): Demonstrates sophisticated understanding of own writing process; moves beyond surface observations to genuine insight	The student shows sophisticated understanding of the synthesis challenge—recognizing the difference between "book reports" vs. weaving sources together. Her insight about research being "ongoing throughout writing" demonstrates mature understanding of the recursive nature of research writing.
Specific Examples & Details	Advanced (A): Uses concrete, specific examples from writing experience to support reflections; details help readers understand the process	Provides excellent specific examples: color-coding outline strategy, peer feedback from Marcus, specific revision decisions about introduction/conclusion. Details about CRAAP test and librarian session show concrete engagement with research process.
Honest Self-Assessment	Advanced (A): Thoughtfully identifies both strengths and areas for improvement; realistic and balanced assessment	Demonstrates mature honesty about both successes (source integration improvement, accessible explanations) and genuine challenges (synthesis vs. summary, maintaining informative tone). Assessment feels realistic and growth-oriented.
Actionable Planning	Emerging (B): Sets appropriate goals with some specific steps; plans are generally realistic and connected to reflection	Sets realistic goals clearly connected to identified challenges (earlier drafting, better note-taking, diverse sources). Plans are specific and actionable, though could elaborate on implementation strategies for some goals like "clearer thesis from beginning."
Clear Communication	Advanced (A): Well-organized, engaging reflection that effectively communicates insights; appropriate length and format	Excellent organization with clear sections and logical flow. Communication is engaging and demonstrates strong metacognitive awareness. Meets length requirements with substantive, focused content throughout.
Authentic Voice & AI Disclosure	Advanced (A): Maintains authentic personal voice throughout; appropriate and honest disclosure of AI assistance used	Voice feels genuinely personal and shows intellectual engagement with the writing process. AI disclosure is honest and specific about what assistance was used while maintaining clear ownership of learning and insights.

Overall Grade Range: A- to A - This reflection demonstrates sophisticated metacognitive thinking with excellent self-analysis and specific examples. Shows strong growth in understanding research writing processes.