Unit 1 Synthesis Essay—Learning to Talk about Dis/Ability

The best you can do as a reader is to try to show why you view a text in a certain way, both in terms of the values you bring to the text and the moments you notice in it. Your readers can then point to different values and different moments, and your ways of reading the text can then be contrasted and argued for, if not resolved.

You can see quotations as flashpoints in a text, moments given a special intensity, made to stand for key concepts and issues. A useful rule of thumb, then, is to quote only those phrases or passages that you want to do further work with or bring pressure upon—whose particular implications and resonances you want to analyze, elaborate, counter, revise, echo, or transform.

– Joseph Harris, “Coming to Terms” (22)

Although summarizing a text may seem like a simple task, understanding and accurately representing what a text does is challenging. In this unit, we will learn how to write critical summaries, analyze texts for uses and limits, and make personal connections to the materials we encounter. We will also engage in ongoing, critical discussions about dis/ability. For our first essay, you will synthesize two of our shared readings, making critical connections to your own experiences and interests relevant to our inquiry of Everyday Representations of Dis/Ability.

The Unit 1 Synthesis Essay is the beginning of your own research projects. Good research isn’t simply finding a few sources that reinforce what we already think. It involves reading with the intention of learning more, complicating our assumptions, and being generous with the new ideas that we encounter. The goal of this assignment is to encourage you to become invested and curious readers who can develop your own relevant, meaningful, researchable questions.

The Synthesis Essay has 2 essential parts.

1) Synthesize Two Sources.

Our summaries are never neutral or objective, and we always understand a text’s project through our own subjectivities. You will choose two texts from the shared reading list and revise/expand the summaries you wrote for homework so that they accurately represent each writer’s project and your interpretation or investment in the project.

Instead of just synthesizing one and then the other, consider how you can put the texts into dialogue with each other, drawing connections and noting the differences between them.

Shared Readings (Choose 2):


3. “Escape.” This American Life.

4. Nirmala Erevelles, Anne Kanga, and Renee Middleton. “How Does It Feel to be a Problem? Race, Disability, and Exclusion in Educational Policy.” Who Benefits from Special Education?
2) Synthesize Personal Experiences/Interests.

The second element of this essay is to synthesize your personal experiences or interests, relevant to the conversations circulating in the two texts that you chose. Use this opportunity to think about the aspects of dis/ability that connect to you, that have seemed relevant in your life so far, or that you think you might want to research further. There are a number of different ways to approach this part of the synthesis. As you consider what to include, remember to be honest and critical.

- What ideas circulating in the texts draw your attention, and why?
- What is one specific moment in your life in which disability became visible to you? How might that moment connect with some of the readings?
- How does disability or issues of ability affect your life on a daily basis? In what ways do the readings help explain or support this? In what ways does dis/ability work differently in your daily life than the ways the readings explained?
- Are their particular concepts from the texts that have encouraged you to re-think or complicate your assumptions about dis/ability? How does that change in thinking affect you? What questions does it raise for you?

Your synthesis essay should articulate a particular focus or interest that has developed out of these texts. You can think of the personal experience/interest as one way to guide this focus. If it’s useful, this can also be a space where you think about what research questions these texts have prompted and that you might continue to explore throughout the rest of the course.

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The Unit 1 Synthesis Essay should be 3-4 pages, 12 pt. font, double-spaced, and formatted according to MLA guidelines. Please include a Works Cited page and an appropriate title. The essay is due by midnight on Thursday, May 30th. Please email it to ahhitt@syr.edu.