

January 2025

## Instruction in Synthesis Writing can be Augmented by Giving Students a Generative AI Prompt

Drew Loewe  
St. Edward's University, drewml@stedwards.edu



Part of the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/trail>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Ideation and Structuring is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching Repository of AI-Infused Learning by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Loewe, Drew, "Instruction in Synthesis Writing can be Augmented by Giving Students a Generative AI Prompt" (2025). *Teaching Repository of AI-Infused Learning*. 5.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/trail/5>

# Instruction in Synthesis Writing can be Augmented by Giving Students a Generative AI Prompt

## Introduction

This teaching strategy is an optional generative AI prompt created and vetted by the instructor. Its purpose is to provide in-process feedback that augments writing instruction for students drafting synthesized multi-source paragraphs. As Nina Vandermeulen, et. al. note, “Synthesis tasks have a high learning potential as the reading, rereading, integration, organization and elaboration of different source texts [call] for knowledge transformation.” Given their high learning potential, synthesis tasks are common in many undergraduate courses, particularly writing courses.

Synthesis is cognitively demanding—and students struggle with it. Common struggles, as identified by Linlin Luo and Kenneth Kiewra, include:

1. **patchwriting** (the text positions one source as the star player; thus, the writing does not weave a real “conversation”);
2. **tag-all writing** (the text has ideas from all sources, but the ideas are not effectively arranged or sequenced), and
3. **separate representation writing**, (the text compiles ideas from individual sources, but they are reported serially and without integration).

The challenges of teaching synthesis writing might be particularly acute in general-education writing courses. Such courses have a mixed population of students with varying skills, preparation, pathways into the course, interests, confidence, and self-efficacy. I have often observed that gen-ed writing students struggle with synthesis writing and indeed with believing that they *can* learn to perform this task beyond the kinds of pseudo-synthesis that Luo and Kiewra describe.

This strategy has been tested with 41 students so far (two sections in Fall 2023) to augment instruction. It has been correlated with an increase in students’ reported confidence as well as better performance on a particular assignment.

## Design and Implementation

### Course Context

WRIT 2302: Writing and Rhetoric II is a one-semester course and is the second course in the general-education writing sequence at St. Edward’s University. St. Edward’s is a private university in Austin, Texas with about 3000 students. It is a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution, with about 40% of students identifying as Hispanic or Latino. About 42% of students are Pell-eligible and about one-third are the first in their families to attend college. The typical teaching load for full-time faculty is four courses in both the Fall and Spring semesters. Sections of WRIT 2302 carry a typical enrollment of 24 students. The course is taught almost entirely via a traditional face-to-face modality, with perhaps one or two asynchronous online sections per term. I teach it face-to-face.

## AI-Infused Strategy

“Entering a Conversation,” the assignment that was the target of this strategy, is the second major project in my sections of WRIT 2302. The assignment is derived from one described in Barrie Wolfe et. al.’s “Knowing What We Know about Writing in the Disciplines: A New Approach to Teaching for Transfer in FYC.” It invites students to learn about and practice synthesis in the context of researching and writing about a recent pop-culture artifact (a video game, film, TV show, book, music album, etc.) that students are particularly interested in. After introducing and contextualizing their chosen artifacts, students analyze and synthesize the arguments of five well-argued reviews, thus laying out “the conversation” about the particular film, game, etc. Students then make their own arguments, speaking with (or back to) the reviewers, thus joining the conversation. The assignment aims to enhance students’ experience and skills in argumentation and synthesis. The assignment’s core goals will be familiar to any instructor who assigns a synthetic review of argumentation or “review of the literature.” But the subject matter of pop culture artifacts and opinionated reviews are intended to make the research and writing more relevant and engaging for students.

As with the other major projects in the course, “Entering a Conversation” is sequenced and scaffolded with workshops, research, source evaluation and selection, iteration of drafts, peer review and instructor feedback on drafts, and an optional unweighted revision after submission and grading.

For the middle section of the assignment, where students are asked to synthesize the course conversation, I modified a paragraph structure explained by Barclay Barrios in his textbook *Emerging: Contemporary Readings for Writers*. As presented in the assignment, this structure asks students to develop the source conversation paragraphs by making these moves:

**Required: Big Idea** – Clearly identify a big idea, theme, or important point that at least two sources have something important to say about, whether they disagree or agree for different reasons.

**Required: First Voice** – Introduce and attribute the first bit of source material using summary, paraphrase, or selected quotation, with MLA format.

**Required: Explain First Voice** – Explain the first voice's perspective on the big idea using example starter phrases.

**Required: Second Voice** – Transition to and introduce the second bit of source material, again using MLA format.

**Required: Explain Second Voice** – Explain the second voice's perspective on the big idea.

**Optional: Other Voices** – As needed, repeat the above moves for a third or fourth voice in the conversation on this big idea.

**Required: Finishing Move** – Develop what emerges from putting these voices together, offering your own interpretation and perspective. This last part of the paragraph positions you as a conversation partner of the sources you cite, so it's crucial to develop well and to make it YOUR writing. This is where you move from synthesizing to analyzing, offering your own interpretation and perspective. Ask: *What do I think about the big idea and the sources' discussions of it? How*

*do my views align or contrast with these sources?* The finishing moves set up the final section of the paper: your own argument.

To augment instruction and to give students another resource when iterating their drafts, I shared a generative AI prompt (tested mostly in Open AI's ChatGPT) that I developed for the purpose of providing in-process feedback to students. The prompt is intended to supplement my help and to aid students in seeing where their drafts might be making one of the major mistakes that Luo and Kiewra describe or where they were not yet developing the required paragraph structure.

The prompt reads:

#### SETUP

You are an experienced, friendly, knowledgeable, helpful writing professor teaching college students. Your goal is to help them master the art of synthesizing source material. Synthesis blends close reading and organized writing so that the writer forms meaningful relationships between different ideas, arguments, and information. Synthesis is not merely about combining sources or structuring paragraphs according to a surface-level formula—it's about creating a dialogue between sources and adding the writers' own voice to the sources' conversation.

#### EXPECTED MOVES FOR THE STUDENT WRITER TO MAKE IN EACH SYNTHESIZED PARAGRAPH

**Required: Big Idea** – Clearly identify a big idea, theme, or important point that at least two sources have something important to say about, whether they disagree or agree for different reasons.

**Required: First Voice** – Introduce and attribute the first bit of source material using summary, paraphrase, or selected quotation, with MLA format.

**Required: Explain First Voice** – Explain the first voice's perspective on the big idea using example starter phrases.

**Required: Second Voice** – Transition to and introduce the second bit of source material, again using MLA format.

**Required: Explain Second Voice** – Explain the second voice's perspective on the big idea.

**Optional: Other Voices** – As needed, repeat the above moves for a third or fourth voice in the conversation on this big idea.

**Required: Finishing Move** – Develop what emerges from putting these voices together, offering a new interpretation and perspective. This last part of the paragraph positions the student writer as a conversation partner of the sources they cite, so it's crucial for the writer to develop well, not just rehash the sources. The finishing moves will set up the final section of the paper: the writer's own argument arising out of and responding to the sources' conversation.

#### COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

- Single-Source Focus: Paragraphs centered on just one source.
- Dominant Source: One source overshadows the others to the point where there is no real conversation.
- Sequential Reporting: Listing source ideas one after the other, without showing their interconnection.

#### PROMPT

Give specific, actionable advice on the draft paragraph below. **\*\*Do not rewrite it\*\***. Identify whether the paragraph makes any of the common mistakes listed above.

Give your advice in the form of bullet-pointed complete sentences or groups of sentences. Avoid vague directives. Always connect your advice to specific passages in the draft. If you need to ask questions about the writing situation, purpose, or genre, do so and wait for input before proceeding.

DRAFT PARAGRAPH

[paste in below]

To introduce students to this tool and what it can be useful for, I showed them the prompt in class, projecting it on the screen. The prompt was also available for them in our learning management system, Canvas. I reminded them of the course policy on disclosing generative AI use, then showed how the prompt responded to anonymized examples of synthesis paragraphs from previous submissions. The examples were at various levels of performance, from *not passing* to *excellent*, and the prompt had relatively more or fewer comments to make, depending on the completeness and quality of the paragraph it was given. We analyzed and compared the prompt's outputs from ChatGPT and Anthropic's Claude.ai. We discussed where we agreed and disagreed with the generated feedback on the paragraphs, and what actions a writer might take when given such feedback. We also discussed how generative AI, especially ChatGPT, sometimes "tries too hard to please" with empty praise, so its outputs should be read against the grain, too.

Many students, but not all, opted to use the prompt while preparing their projects, mostly in the free version of ChatGPT. Overall, the use of the prompt seemed to lead to an increase in productive discussions with individual students in class workshops following the session in which the prompt was introduced. This is likely because more iteration of ideas and reworking of paragraphs of drafts was going on than in previous semesters. The prompt seemed to foster more iteration and more attention to the various "moves" the assignment called for in writing synthesized multi-source paragraphs.

In anonymous responses to open-ended questions in an IRB-approved survey near the end of the course, students reported that the prompt was helpful because it provided immediate feedback and identified gaps between expectations and the drafts in progress, thus aiding iteration and revision. Some stated that they felt more confident in their ability to advise peers in peer reviews after using the prompt to aid in developing their arguments. Others mentioned that the prompt encouraged them to spend more time identifying themes and connecting sources on the basis of ideas. One student stated that they regretted not using the prompt at all. So, there is at least some self-reported data to corroborate my subjective impressions of growth in students' confidence and skills in synthesis writing. More potential corroboration arises when grades on the Fall 2023 submissions of Proj. 2, where this prompt was available, are compared to the previous semester (Spring 2023) in which it was not available:

- The mean (average) score on the project for Fall was 208/250 vs. 198/250 in Spring.
- The median score is slightly higher in the Fall semester (212/250) than in the Spring (209/250).

- In the Fall semester, there were more top scores: (250): 5 vs. 1 in the Spring; (246) 9 in the Fall vs. 2 in the Spring.
- In the Fall semester, 32 students scored 209 or above vs. 25 in the Spring.

### Evaluation and Reflection

This is limited, non-longitudinal data, but guided, optional use of generative AI prompts might correlate with increased confidence and performance in synthesis writing in a general-education writing course. By possibly correlating with increased student performance and confidence, this augmentation to teaching and learning may in turn aid student success, persistence, and retention as downstream effects.

Similar interventions and data might support or challenge these possible correlations. I have kept the prompt in place for Fall 2024, and will make it available when Proj. 2 arises later in the semester, so more data will soon be available.

Of course, challenges to deriving generalizable findings and deciding where—if anywhere—generative AI fits in the pedagogy of a general-education writing course include:

- separating the effect of generative AI interventions vs. other pedagogy and instructional design, including instructor experience with a particular assignment;
- evolving ethical and disclosure policies and practices around the use of generative AI;
- programmatic policy or consistency that might enable large-scale, longitudinal study;
- student incentives to participate in such studies;
- resistance and mistrust around generative AI, authenticity, and academic misconduct;
- instructor time and attention in light of all the other “capsule liberal education” (see Thomas Masters) outcomes expected of such courses;
- the explosive and ever-changing evolution of generative AI technologies, such as custom GPTs available to paid subscribers of ChatGPT; and
- institutional support for instructors, many of whom are precariously employed and subject to competing policies.

### Scholarly References

Barrios, B. (2019). *Emerging: Contemporary readings for writers* (4th ed.). Bedford/St. Martin's.

Luo, L., & Kiewra, K. (2019). Soaring to successful synthesis writing. *Journal of Writing Research*, 11(1), 163–209.

Masters, T. M. (2004). *Practicing writing: The postwar discourse of freshman English*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Vandermeulen, N., De La Paz, S., Wiley, J., & Van den Broek, P. (2023). Introduction to the special issue on synthesis tasks: Where reading and writing meet. *Reading and Writing*, 36(4), 747–768.

Wolfe, J., Olson, B., & Wilder, L. (2014). Knowing what we know about writing in the disciplines: A new approach to teaching for transfer in FYC. *The WAC Journal*, 25(1), 42–77.

### Acknowledgement of AI

ChatGPT 4o was used to generate APA-formatted citations in the References from MLA-formatted citations. It was also used to format the assignment in LaTeX markup to be compiled as a PDF from the original Canvas HTML in which the assignment was presented to students.