

Synthesize, Don't Summarize!

Directions: Read the passage below, then complete the activity that follows.

Writing a letter to an author may seem awkward. After all, the author knows nothing about you. You may at first be tempted to prove to the author that you read his or her book by summarizing what happened. But think about it. The author wrote the book. He or she already knows what the book is about. What the author doesn't know is how the book affected you.

The two passages below are from letters written to Daniel Keyes, author of *Flowers for Algernon*. The first passage tells the author what happens in the book. The second passage tells the author how the reader responded to what happened. Which passage do you think the author would find more interesting to read?

Passage A

Two scientists discovered Charlie in a high school reading class. They decided he was an ideal candidate for a new operation they had been trying on a lab mouse they called Algernon. The operation had greatly improved the intelligence of the mouse and the scientists believed there

was a good chance the operation would raise Charlie's intelligence, too.

Passage B

In your book, Charlie works in a bakery with uneducated workers who show no sympathy for his condition. They laugh and snicker at Charlie. At times, I've been made fun of and it hurts to the point where I want to strike out. Charlie laughed with those who mocked him. He thought they were his friends. Unlike Charlie, however, I have the ability to realize the difference between good-natured teasing and mocking.

To summarize means to recall details. To synthesize, however, means to combine one or more ideas into one written presentation. In Passage B, the reader combines a detail about Charlie's life with a detail about his own life. The result is a more interesting piece of writing, one the audience (in this case, the author) would find interesting but also informative. **This is one key to good writing: Always keep the author in mind!**

ACTIVITY

Read each passage and determine if the writer is summarizing or synthesizing. For each passage that summarizes, suggest ways the author can weave reader-response details into the paragraph.

1. I was enraged when Scout's teacher told her that she wasn't allowed to read anymore. I felt this way because reading is so valuable to me, and it's a way of escaping from my troubles. Reading is so important, and this part of your story showed me that. (to Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*)
2. *Night* is a true story. Elie Weisel and his family were split up and transported from the Jewish ghetto which had been their town to Aushwitz. He and his father fought for freedom and survival. (to Eki Weisel, *Night*)
3. I have never been to California, never seen the great golden valleys nor the verdant peach orchards or fields of burgeoning grapes. I have never moved from my small community, certainly never ridden across half the nation through cold rain and sweltering heat in an overloaded jalopy. I have never questioned the fact that there would be food, and plenty of it upon our table, and a house, all our own, above our heads. (to John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*)
4. Harry has strong ties to his family. He feels love and affection for them and always thinks about them. Harry is a boy with strength. He conquers all that comes his way. When the evil sorcerer Voldemort is mentioned, Harry shudders at his name. (to J.K. Rowling)