

Making a synthesis (2): recognizing types and levels of information

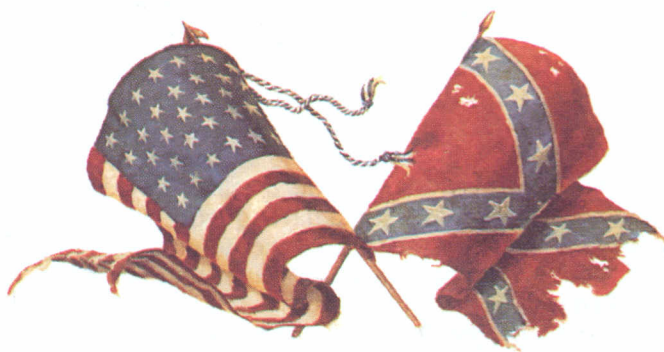
In Unit 6 we saw that one useful first step in making a synthesis of a text is identifying sequences, each of them focussing on a particular topic (or aspect of a topic). We also saw that it is useful to distinguish, within each sequence, different types and levels of information, e.g. a structure from its parts, a category from its elements, a process from its stages.

In this section we will practise distinguishing yet other types and levels of information.

1. A. Read the following text and divide it into paragraphs. What aspect of the main topic would each of your paragraphs focus on?

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Although much has been written about the causes of the American Civil War, historians do not agree on the interpretation of this complex problem. It is, however, possible to mention certain factors that complicated relations between the North and the South of the US and thus made war possible. In the first place, geography, climate and historical circumstances were responsible for economic and social differences. Most of the country's merchants, manufacturers, and bankers were based in the North, especially the North-east, while the South continued to be mainly agricultural. Thus there was disagreement over such policies as tariff protection, federally financed roads and canals, a national banking system, and free public land in the West. In addition to such differences, slavery, once common to all the original 13 colonies, had almost disappeared in the North by 1800, but was becoming a permanent institution in the South. Especially after 1830 it became the object of violent criticism on the part of Northern abolitionists, who would not allow slavery in the new Western territories. And finally, from a political standpoint, the two major parties, Whig and Democrat, split on the issue of slavery. Southern Whigs joined Southern Democrats in defense of slavery, while in the North the new Republican party, which was strongly against slavery, succeeded the Whigs and was joined by many antislavery Democrats. This meant that national parties no longer held the country together. When the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, was elected President in 1860, many Southerners felt that they were a threatened minority in a hostile nation. The following year, in a convention held in Montgomery, Alabama, eleven Southern states announced the creation of the Confederate States of America, of which Jefferson Davis of Mississippi was elected President. The war, which lasted four years (1861-65) and cost billions of dollars and more casualties than any other in US history, caused the ruin and impoverishment of many Southern states. It also left behind long-lasting feelings of racial animosity. However, it helped the establishment of a strongly centralized federal government and brought about the abolition of slavery. It also accelerated the development of modern industrial America.



B. How many kinds of *causes* of the Civil War are mentioned in the text, and what are they? Which expressions clearly «signal» them in sequence?

C. For each kind of *cause*, underline the sentence(s) that most succinctly *explain(s)* it. Do not underline specific examples or more detailed explanations.

D. The text also mentions some major *consequences* of the Civil War. Complete this list:

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____
- d) abolition of slavery
- e) _____

E. Copy and complete the following summary of the *causes* of the American Civil War:

The causes of the American Civil War can be traced back to three main series of factors. First, geography, caused and social differences: while industrial and trading activities , the South Second, slavery was , whereas in the North Third, political parties split : while in the North the new antislavery Republican party was joined , in the South the Whigs

2. In the following text, science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov presents a *thesis* and tries to support it with a series of *arguments*.

A. Read the text and number the paragraphs. State what Asimov's thesis is. How many arguments does he provide in support of it? Which expressions in the text «signal» the introduction of each argument?

TRAVELING THROUGH TIME

Could we do as is done in science-fiction stories – sit in some machine, push some buttons, and step out onto Earth as it will be in AD 3000, or as it was in 3000 BC? This seems extremely improbable, for various reasons.

To start with, Earth is moving around the sun at a speed of 30 kilometers per second. In three hours, it travels 324,000 kilometers. If we stepped into a time machine, pushed a button, and stepped out three hours into the past, then we would find ourselves in outer space, with Earth 324,000 kilometers away.

If we imagine that the time machine would move with Earth, then we would have to move the 324,000 kilometers in just the time it takes to push the button: we would then have to go faster than the speed of light.

Secondly, the process would be even more complicated than that, because not only is Earth moving around the sun, but it is moving with the sun around the center of the galaxy, and with the galaxy among the other galaxies.

If we managed to match all those movements, then it seems logical to suppose that it would take energy to do so: traveling through time would require as much energy as traveling through space. And as much time, too – which would instantly negate the whole idea.

Furthermore, there are paradoxes involved. Think of the old story of the man who goes back into the past and kills his own grandfather, so that he himself was never born, and could not have killed anybody. This is the most famous example of how traveling into the past would destroy the principle of causality.

Finally, even if the principle of causality could be violated, and if some future technological advance could make time travel practical, it still remains that, as far as we know, nobody from the future has come to visit us.

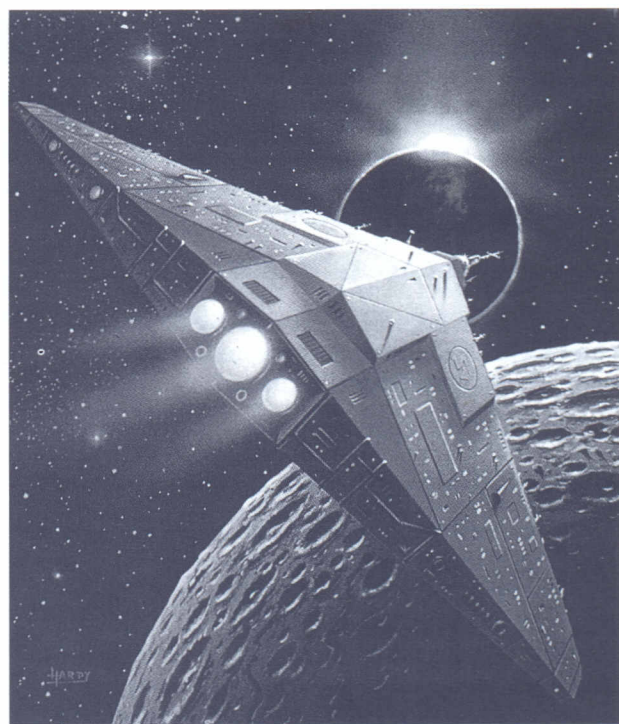
That might mean that the time travelers do not want to be seen – or it might mean that nobody in the future will ever solve the problem. (I suspect probably the latter.)

B. Divide the text into sequences to highlight the following text organization:

THESIS

ARGUMENTS (1, 2, 3, ...)

CONCLUSION



C. Several arguments are expressed through *conditional sentences* of the type *If ... , then ...*. In his first argument, for example, Asimov puts forward a *hypothesis* (e.g. 'if we stepped into a time machine, pushed a button, and stepped out three hours into the past ...') and demonstrates the consequences which prove the hypothesis to be impracticable ('... then we would find ourselves in outer space, with Earth 324,000 kilometers away').

Look back at the *first*, *second* and *fourth* arguments. Underline the *hypotheses* and double underline the *consequences* which make them impracticable.

D. The *third* argument is expressed through an *example* and the *consequence* that can be drawn from it. Double underline this *consequence*, which Asimov mentions in support of his thesis.

E. Summarize the text by copying and completing the following outline. From the words and sentences you have *double underlined*, choose only those that best and most succinctly express the ideas you need.

THESIS: _____

ARGUMENTS:

1. a) *we would find ourselves in outer space*
b) *we would have to go faster than ...*

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

CONCLUSION: _____