**Student Example of a Synthesis Essay**  
Note that Kate MacAulay begins by presenting the focusing question that connects the texts she is analyzing. She then summarizes these texts and presents her mapping thesis statement. She devotes more than half of the body of the essay to a close analysis of the texts before she moves on to present her own independent thinking in the synthesis section of the essay.

**TECHNOLOGY'S PERIL AND POTENTIAL**  
Kate MacAulay (student)  
Recently in English class, we have been focusing on the question, What effect is technology having on humanity and the quality of life in the twenty-first century? We have had heated discussions about the use of cell phones, palm pilots, beepers, e-mail, chat rooms, and the Web. As part of my investigation of this question, I read two texts: a chapter from George Ritzer’s book The McDonaldization of Society, entitled “The Irrationality of Rationality: Traffic Jams on Those ‘Happy Trails,’ and an article published in the magazine Wired entitled “Who Am We?” by Sherry Turkle. In his chapter, Ritzer, a sociology professor, explains how technology has rationalized businesses and many facets of society following the McDonald’s model. He argues that modern technology is causing loss of quality products, time, and relationships. In the McDonaldized system, where everything is designed logically for economy and convenience, things have become more artificial, and our relationships have become more superficial. In her article “Who Am We?” Sherry Turkle, a psychology professor at MIT, shows how computers and the Internet are transforming our views of ourselves and the way we interact socially. Focusing on computers’ capacities for simulation and promoting interaction, Turkle has explored MUDs (multi-user domains), which allow people to create virtual identities. MUDs, Turkle believes, contribute to the formation of postmodern multiple selves and raise new questions about personal identity and morality. Although both Turkle and Ritzer identify problems in technology’s influence and in society’s responses to it, Turkle sees more potential and gain where Ritzer sees mostly peril and loss. Both articles made me question how we define our values and morality in this postmodern, technologically advanced world and persuaded me of the need for caution in embracing technology.

Although Ritzer and Turkle both see technology as having some negative effects on human relations and the quality of life, they disagree about exactly where the most interesting and serious problems lie. Ritzer believes that the problems caused by technology are not problems within the individual, but problems imposed on the individual by McDonaldized systems. For example, Ritzer claims that fast-food restaurants encourage us to eat unhealthy food quickly and also contribute to “the disintegration of the family” (141) by taking away family time. He also believes that rationalized systems create illusions of fun, reality, and friendliness. He talks about the “scripted interactions” (138) that employees are supposed to have with customers, where they are told exactly what to say to every customer, making interactions less real. Further, rationalized systems are dehumanizing in the kinds of jobs they create that “don’t offer much in the way of satisfaction or stability” (137), benefiting only stockholders, owners, and employers.

In contrast, Turkle responds to technology’s threat by focusing inward on technology’s effect on the self and on relationships. While she is clearly intrigued by such Internet capabilities as multi-user domains, she acknowledges that this potential for multiple simultaneous identities threatens the wholeness of individuals, possibly damaging our emotional and psychological selves. Her concern is that people become addicted to these games because in the virtual world it is easy to create better “selves,” to be what you wish you were. Turkle shows that people can lose themselves between the real world and the virtual world and be “imprisoned by the screens” (199). Although the virtual world is exciting and fun, she notes that “[o]ur experiences there are serious play” (199). She also examines cases of virtual characters who get into relationships with other characters, including cyber-sex relationships. She ponders the issue of cyber-sex immorality and adultery.

Despite Turkle and Ritzer’s agreement that technology can damage us as a society, they disagree on their overall outlook and on our power to respond positively to technology’s influence. I find Ritzer’s views almost entirely negative. He believes that we are irreversibly damaged by technological advances because we are completely caught up in the McDonaldized system, with few parts of society left unchanged. Almost all of the family-owned neighborhood restaurants or mom-and-pop grocery stores have been taken over by franchises like Red Robin or Safeway. The costs of these rationalized systems, he says, are “inefficiency, illusions of various types, disenchantment, dehumanization, and homogenization” (124). In this chapter of his book, Ritzer doesn’t mention any ways that our lives could be improved by these systems; he gives only examples of the way we are misled and damaged by them.

Turkle’s approach strikes me as much more positive and balanced than Ritzer’s.Optimistically, she explains that MUDs can give people self-knowledge that they can apply to real life: “[t]he anonymity of MUDs gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones” (152). Turkle sees an opportunity for us to grow as individuals and to learn to use technology in a positive way: “If we can cultivate awareness of what stands behind our screen personae, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation” (199). Turkle’s views are more complex than Ritzer’s. She believes that we have to take responsibility for our own habits and psychological responses to technology. She encourages us to be aware of how we interact with technology and believes that we can grow as individuals using this technology.

After reading these articles, I have realized how the continuing advancement oftechnology raises new moral questions. In a McDonaldized system, where everything is designed for convenience, there seem to be many places for morals to be left out of the picture. For example, is it okay for us to exchange real human interaction for convenience and saving time? Is there something wrong with our ethics when interesting and fulfilling jobs are eliminated by machines or replaced by dead-end, low-paying Mcjobs? Turkle too shows us how virtual worlds pose new moral questions for us. In MUDs, people can form virtual relationships, even cyber-sex relationships. The people behind the characters are real people, even if they are acting as someone else. If a married person has a cyber-sex relationship on a MUD, is he or she cheating? If a person commits a virtual assault or other crime that has no real-world, physical effects, should he or she feel guilty or sinful for the intention? Ritzer and Turkle have made me see how important these questions are.

Reading the articles made me strongly believe that we must use this technology inmoderation in order to preserve individual qualities and our relationships. From our class discussions, I remember what Scott said about the way that the Internet connects people. He said that people like his uncle, who was severely injured on the job, use the Internet as a way of “getting out” to meet people and socialize. He pointed out how the Microsoft Gaming Zone has brought his uncle into an ongoing backgammon tournament through which he has made friends. Meanwhile his aunt has gotten a lot of pleasure out of playing and problem solving in the world of MUDs.  
But my own experience has left me concerned about the danger we face as emotional, social beings in the face of technology. The other night at a family gathering, one of my cousins, after discussing car buying with some of the relatives, got the urge to research new car prices. He left the room, logged onto the Internet, and spent the rest of the evening looking at cars and prices. We saw him only once the whole evening when he came out to get a slice of pie. My cousin's withdrawal from the conversation made me think about Ritzer’s and Turkle’s concerns that technology decreases real interactions among people.

Ritzer and Turkle offer us a warning that technology can be damaging if we don’trecognize and overcome its dangers. I would encourage us not to let ourselves become dominated by technology, not to let it take our full attention just because it is there, and not to overlook the complex moral questions that technology poses. The convenience that technology offers—our e-mail, cell phones, and debit cards—should help us save time that can be spent in nurturing our relationships with other people. The real challenge is to find ways to become even better people because of technology.

Works Cited

Ritzer, George. The McDonaldization of Society. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge, 2000.

Turkle, Sherry. “Who Am We?” Wired Jan. 1996: 148+.