Synthesizing Ideas

To analyze the works of a poet, you show how she uses similar images in three different poems to explore a recurring concept. To solve a crime, a detective studies several eyewitness accounts to figure out who did it. To trace the history of photojournalism, a professor compares the uses of photography during the Civil War and during the Vietnam War. These are all cases where someone synthesizes—brings together material from two or more sources in order to generate new information or to support a new perspective. When you do research, you need to go beyond what your sources say; you need to use what they say to inspire and support what you want to say. This chapter focuses on how to synthesize ideas you find in other sources as the basis for your own ideas.

Reading for Patterns and Connections

Your task as a writer is to find as much information as you can on your topic—and then to sift through all that you have found to determine and support what you yourself will write. In other words, you’ll need to synthesize ideas and information from the sources you’ve consulted to figure out first what arguments you want to make and then to provide support for those arguments.

When you synthesize, you group similar bits of information together, looking for patterns or themes or trends and trying to identify the key points. For example, in researching the effectiveness of the SAT writing exam, you find several sources showing that scores correlate directly with length and that a majority of U.S. colleges and universities have decided
not to count the results of the test in their admission decisions. You can infer from that pattern of research results that the test is not yet seen as an effective measure of writing ability. Here are some tips for reading to identify patterns and connections:

- Read all your sources with an open mind. Withhold judgment, even of sources that seem wrong-headed or implausible. Don’t jump to conclusions.
- Take notes and write a brief **SUMMARY** of each source to help you see relationships, patterns, and connections among your sources. Take notes on your own thoughts, too.
- Pay attention to your first reactions. You’ll likely have many ideas to work with, but your first thoughts can often lead somewhere that you will find interesting. Try **FREEWRITING, CLUSTERING**, or **LISTING** to see where they lead. How do these thoughts and ideas relate to your topic? Where might they fit into your rough **OUTLINE**?
- Try to think creatively, and pay attention to thoughts that flicker at the edge of your consciousness, as they may well be productive.
- Be playful. Good ideas sometimes come when we let our guard down or take ideas to extremes just to see where they lead.

Ask yourself these questions about your sources:

- What sources make the strongest arguments? What makes them so strong?
- Do some arguments recur in several sources?
- Which arguments do you agree with? disagree with? Of those you disagree with, which ones seem strong enough that you need to **ACKNOWLEDGE** them in your text?
- Are there any disagreements among your sources?
- Are there any themes you see in more than one source?
- Are any data—facts, statistics, examples—or experts cited in more than one source?
- Do several of your sources use the same terms? Do they use the terms similarly, or do they use them in different ways?
What have you learned about your topic? How have your sources affected your thinking on your topic? Do you need to adjust your thesis? If so, how?

Have you discovered new questions you need to investigate?

Keep in mind your rhetorical situation — have you found the information you need that will achieve your purpose, appeal to your audience, and suit your genre and medium?

What is likely to emerge from this questioning is a combination of big ideas, including new ways of understanding your topic and insights into recent scholarship about it, and smaller ones, such as how two sources agree with each other but not completely and how the information in one source supports or undercuts the argument of another. These ideas and insights will become the basis for your own ideas and for what you have to say about the topic.

**Synthesizing Ideas Using Notes**

You may find that identifying connections among your sources is easier if you examine them together rather than reading them one by one. For example, taking notes on note cards and then laying the cards out on a desk or table (or on the floor) lets you see passages that seem related. Doing the same with photocopies or printouts of your sources can help you identify similarities as well.

In doing research for an essay arguing that the sale of assault weapons should be banned, you might find several sources that address the scope of U.S. citizens’ right to bear arms. On the next page are notes taken on three such sources: Joe Klein, a journalist writing in *Time.com*; Antonin Scalia, a U.S. Supreme Court justice, quoted in an online news article; and Drew Westen, a professor of psychology writing in a blog sponsored by the *New York Times*. Though the writers hold very different views, juxtaposing these notes and highlighting certain passages shows a common thread running through the sources. In this example, all three sources might be used to support the thesis that restrictions on the owning of weapons — but not an outright ban — are both constitutional and necessary.
Source 1

Limits of gun ownership

Although the U. S. Constitution includes the right to bear arms, that right is not absolute. "No American has the right to own a stealth bomber or a nuclear weapon. Armor-piercing bullets are forbidden. The question is where you draw a reasonable bright line."
—Klein, "How the Gun Won" — quote

Source 4

Limits of gun ownership

Supreme Court Justice Antonin M. Scalia has noted that when the Constitution was written and ratified, some weapons were barred. So limitations could be put on owning some weapons, as long as the limits are consistent with those in force in 1789.
—Scalia, quoted in Woods — paraphrase

Source 3

Limits of gun ownership

Westen’s "message consulting" research has shown that Americans are ambivalent about guns but react very positively to a statement of principle that includes both the right to own guns and restrictions on their ownership, such as prohibiting large ammunition clips and requiring all gun purchasers to undergo background checks for criminal behavior or mental illness.
—Westen — paraphrase
Synthesizing Information to Support Your Own Ideas

If you’re doing research to write a **REPORT**, your own ideas will be communicated primarily through which information you decide to include from the sources you cite and how you organize that information. If you’re writing a **TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**, your synthesis may focus on the themes, techniques, or other patterns you find. If you’re writing a research-based **ARGUMENT**, on the other hand, your synthesis of sources must support the position you take in that argument. No matter what your genre, the challenge is to synthesize information from your research to develop ideas about your topic and then to support those ideas.

**Entering the Conversation**

As you read and think about your topic, you will come to an understanding of the concepts, interpretations, and controversies relating to your topic — and you’ll become aware that there’s a larger conversation going on. When you begin to find connections among your sources, you will begin to see your own place in that conversation, to discover your own ideas and your own stance on your topic. This is the exciting part of a research project, for when you write out your own ideas on the topic, you will find yourself entering that conversation. Remember that your **STANCE** as an author needs to be clear: simply stringing together the words and ideas of others isn’t enough. You need to show readers how your source materials relate to one another and to your thesis.

**IF YOU NEED MORE HELP**

See Chapter 49, **QUOTING, PARAPHRASING, AND SUMMARIZING**, for help in integrating source materials into your own text. See also Chapter 50 on **ACKNOWLEDGING SOURCES, AVOIDING PLAGIARISM** for advice on giving credit to the sources you cite.