The process of synthesizing information is not as simple as restating what you have read through a series of summaries and quotes. Rather, it is the process of applying sources to your research question or thesis. This handout explains the process of synthesis and provides strategies for connecting other’s work to your own.

**Definition**

The word *synthesize* comes from the Greek word *suntithenai* which means “to place together.” When you synthesize, you are uniting (syn) different propositions (theses) made by various sources to build a new idea.

**Questions to Ask**

You can relate ideas in many ways: discussing similarities or overlap, identifying differences or contradictions, analyzing how ideas are in dialogue with one another, considering how ideas in one source expand on those in another source, identifying patterns of ideas between sources, etc. Often, a good paper will include a combination of these strategies.

Keep these questions in mind when synthesizing:

- How is the information in this source relevant to the question I am asking?
- How does the information from this source contribute to answering my research question?
- How does the information in this source relate to the information in my other sources?
- How do the ideas from one source and the ideas from another source combine to make a new idea?
- How does the information in this source support my idea or the idea in another source?
- How does the idea in this source call into question my idea or the idea in another source?
- How does the information in this source refute my idea or the idea in another source?
- Are there any patterns that seem to run through the information from multiple sources?

Remember, you want to relate the ideas from your sources not only to each other but also back to your own research question or thesis. The key here is to connect your own ideas with ideas from the sources you read to help create a cohesive picture for your audience.

*Note:* For more information on how to include other’s work in your own, please see our “Incorporating Sources” handout.
Synthesis Strategies

In order to help you synthesize your information, we recommend the following strategies:

**Source Boards**

In this method, you separate your information by source and then connect the sources together. You will need several sheets of paper, a writing instrument, and several different colored highlighters.

1. Start by putting the name of one of your sources on the top of a sheet of paper.
2. After (or while) you read the source, write down a handful of the most important points from it. Remember, there are two kinds of important points: the **main ideas** of the paper and the parts of the paper that are **most significant** to you and your research. Sometimes the part that is most significant to you is not the main idea of the paper. Put each idea on a new line, and leave space between the ideas.
3. Do this for each of your sources.
4. Now, look at one of your sheets, and read the first main idea. Is this idea similar or identical to any of the other ideas on the sheets from the other sources? If so, highlight these like ideas in the same color.
5. Look at the next idea on that sheet. Does this lend support to an idea on a different sheet? Does it conflict with or say the opposite of an idea from another sheet? Wherever you find links, whether they agree or oppose, color-code the ideas together.
6. Now, make a new set of sheets, each one titled with the idea or concept encoded by a single color. Underneath, write the name of each source that contained this idea on a separate line, and next to each source’s name, write any relevant details from that source on this topic.

**Topic Boards**

This method uses your research topic or question to organize your information. You will need several sheets of paper and a writing instrument.

1. Start by titling a sheet of paper with your main topic or question. Underneath, list some subtopics or questions that fall under it.
2. After (or while) you read each source, look for information that falls under one of your subtopics. One way to do this is to write a brief summary after every paragraph or page, and consider whether this information lends support to or sheds light on any of your subtopics.
3. Next, record this information and the source it came from under the subtopic it relates to.

In addition to writing down your subtopics, you can add an extra sheet titled “Questions,” and write down any new questions that come to mind as you are reading. You may want to note in the margin which source you were reading when you got the idea.

You can also try using different colored index cards for different sources. Write one idea on each card, and then rearrange the cards from all the sources to group related ideas together.

**Webbing**

This method shows the various relationships between the information you’ve gathered from sources.

You will need a sheet of paper, a writing instrument, and a red, a blue, and a green pen, pencil, or marker.
1. As you read each source, write down the overarching main idea as it relates to your research topic or question.

2. After you have read all (or at least some) of your sources, draw several circles or boxes on a piece of paper, and write down one of the main ideas in each.

3. Now, look at these ideas. For identical ideas, draw a blue line between them. For ideas that support each other, draw a green line between them. For ideas that contradict, draw a red line between them.

By following any one of these strategies, a task that at first seemed overwhelming will be much more manageable.

References

