A guide to synthesis in your writing and developing your own voice

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- A guide to critical reading
- Themed notes method
- Showing analysis and evaluation in your writing
- Constructing an argument
- A guide to developing an argument map
- A guide to synthesis
- A guide to critical writing

Introduction

Synthesis is an important academic skill and a form of analytical writing which involves grouping together ideas from others within the body of your assignment. Synthesis does not focus on a single author (or academic source), it is more complex and draws on insights from a range of literature (or academic sources) to identify both similar and contradictory ideas with a view to establishing links, tensions and 'threads' to support your argument.

This guide will take you through a step by step approach to developing synthesis in your work including: how to collate your notes, allowing you to compare and contrast a range of authors and identify reoccurring themes; how to present these themes within the body of your assignment; how to start to introduce your own voice and develop your insights and your argument.

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How do we demonstrate synthesis in academic writing?

Example 1

During this session, there were problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy (PSRN) activities that were both adult-led (bowling) and free to be independently chosen by children (PSRN exploration table). This is significant because both the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) (Moyles et al, 2002) and the Research Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) research agree that there needs to be a sensitive balance of child-initiated and adult-led activity in effective Early Years settings.

(extract from a student assignment on 'Supporting Early Learning' – Skills Edge 2015)

Example 2

It seems to be agreed upon that the process of reviewing the literature is continual and cyclical as the research project progresses (Hart, 1998; Randolph, 2009). This is also in line with Creswell's (2014) suggestion that qualitative research questions are likely to develop and change throughout the research process. The insights gained through the literature review were considered in the subsequent phase of operationalising the research questions, which will be discussed in the following section.

(extract from a student assignment on 'Developing Research Questions: Evaluating and Enhancing the Teaching and Learning of Academic Writing' - Skills Edge materials 2015)

6 synthesis steps

1. Read your source material

2. Make notes from each source using your own words

3. Using a blank piece of paper, create a grid using one box for each source according to the authors and information

4. Complete the grid by making bullet points of the main ideas from each source

5. Look for common themes and identify the arguments from each author

6. Present your argument, using a new paragraph for each new argument

Example (based on work from the University of New England, 2016)

Consider the following essay title:

‘Discuss why assignment essays are common assessment tasks in undergraduate tertiary coursework, and evaluate the effectiveness of assignments as an avenue for learning’.

A student has made notes from four sources below and identified a range of themes on the topic of ‘assignments’ versus ‘exams’.

Jones et al. (2004, pp. 36-37)

assignments -> students get feedback on their progress midcourse

exams -> uncritical approaches

assignments -> learn to read and write in the study subject

Peters (2009, p. 79)

exams -> relies on memory under pressure

exams -> no feedback during learning

assignments -> learn the discourse of the subject

Wonderland University (2006)

exams -> success relies on memory

exams -> 'sudden death' approach to testing

exams -> not equal opportunity for all students to demonstrate knowledge

exams -> much higher failure rate

assignments -> teach the 'talk' of the subject

Abbot (2008, para. 20)

assignments -> inefficient, too much time to mark, costly

assignments -> too many plagiarism issues

exams -> 'clean-cut approach as you get students knowledge under supervised circumstances'

When writing up your notes put authors together that hold similar views

The following paragraph argues the point for assignment essays as being fairer than exams. This creates a stronger body of evidence for your argument, demonstrates that you have read widely on the topic and provides links to your line of argument being presented within your assignment. The first sentence states the writer's line of argument and tells the reader what to expect. The last sentence below shows the development of the writer's argument and demonstrates how they have advanced their argument based on the evidence presented.

Example

The topic sentence is generally part of your 'line of argument'.

Synthesised information is from two different sources. The sentence is a summary of their findings.

Using assignment essays for assessment supports learning better than the traditional examination system. It is considered that course-work assignment essays can lessen the extreme stress experienced by some students over 'sudden death' end of semester examinations and reduce the failure rate (Wonderland University, 2006; Peters, 2008). Study skills researchers (Jones et al., 2004; Wonderland University, 2006; Peters, 2008) defend assessment by assignment because research assignments can be used to assess student learning mid-course and so provide them with helpful feedback. They also consider that assignment work lends itself to more critical approaches which help the students to learn the discourse of their subjects. In contrast, Abbot (2008) argues that assignments are inefficient, costly to manage and are the cause of plagiarism problems in universities. He states that "assessment by examination is a clean-cut approach as you get students' knowledge under supervised circumstances" (Abbot, 2008, p.20). The weight of evidence, however, would suggest that it is a fairer and more balanced approach to have some assessment by assignment rather than completely by examinations.

Source: University of New England, 2016

Information from a single source into a summary sentence and a short quote

The concluding sentence comes after you have advanced your argument with strong backup evidence.

Synthesised information is from three different sources into two summary sentences. Publications are listed in chronological order, separated by a semi-colon.

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Own voice

It is important not to be neutral in your assignments but instead present your own position within your work based on the evidence you have synthesised; this is called 'own voice'. This can be done by using a combination of caution, hedging, evaluative adjectives, adverbs and verbs. By using either positive or negative language to present your evaluation, you demonstrate your own position to your reader. Below are some examples and phrases to use.

Examples (based on work from the University of Melbourne (no date))

- The investigations to date **may** indicate a fundamental flaw in this approach. It certainly shows **a need for more research** on this topic.

- Peters (2015) is **misguided** when she **inaccurately claims** that nurses need to be shown how to use online learning tools to be effective learners.

- Furthermore, it **appears** that Lane et al. (2002) **may have overlooked** some key data when they raise the possibility that ethnicity is the key indicator for hypertension amongst the UK population.

Phrases that could be used to evaluate evidence / show your own voice

To show positive comments	To show negative comments
Valid	Disregard
Sound	Incomplete
Insightful	Inadequate
Helpful	Problematic
Significant	Questionable
Astute	Invalid
Contributed to / widely accepted	Disappointing
Strongly	Unlikely
Clearly / Certainly	There is no solid reason for
Interestingly / Importantly	Fails to provide/consider
It is clear that / It is evident that	Overt / explicit / clear problems with
It is interesting/useful to note	Possible errors in / problems with / flaws in this theory
It is important to point out / emphasise	
Having looked at the debate/ data/results, it would seem that	This argument is limited / flawed / unconvincing / unsatisfactory because
Would tend to suggest that	This argument is of little importance because
Appears that / perhaps / possibly / arguably /	There is a lack of Ignores / does not take into account

Common problems with synthesis

- Presenting your authors separately instead of collectively
- Relying on single source notes to construct your draft rather than synthesised notes
- Giving a personal opinion rather basing your views on the evidence you have presented
- Presenting summarised or paraphrased statements that have not been analysed, interpreted or linked to your assignment
- Overgeneralising and being too vague
- Assuming casual connections without presenting evidence for them

References

UoB (2015) *Skills Edge.* Available at: http://lrweb.beds.ac.uk/professional-and-academic-development-pad/academic-skills-teaching-toolkit/skills-edge (Accessed: 13 June 2016)

University of Melbourne (no date) *Voice in Academic Writing.* Available at: https://airport.unimelb.edu.au/ (Accessed: 12 June 2015)

University of New England (2016) *Synthesising Evidence.* Available at: http://learninghub.une.edu.au/tlc/aso/aso-online/academic-writing/synthesising-evidence.php (Accessed: 13 June 2016)

Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit: **lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub**

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