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Literature Review: Synthesizing Multiple Sources

The term **“synthesis”** means to **combine separate elements to form a whole**. Writing teachers often use this term when they assign students to write a literature review or other paper that requires the use of a variety of sources. When writing teachers use this term, they often hope that students will write papers that make a variety of connections among source material so that their papers are not organized source-by-source but are organized topic-by-topic to create a whole text. This handout is designed to help students better use synthesis in their writing and will offer strategies in the areas of:

- (1) pre-writing,
- (2) writing,
- (3) recognizing and
- (4) revising for synthesis.

1. Planning a Synthesis Paper

A common strategy for planning a synthesis paper is to create a “grid of common points.”

A grid of common points is a heuristic that allows a writer to group source material into specific categories. These categories can help the writer organize the paper.

To create a grid follow these steps (*note: be sure to see example grid on next page*):

1. As you read your source material, take note of words or ideas that repeat themselves.
2. As you read your source material, also make note of conflicts or contradictions in the information.
3. Based on the repetitions and contradictions you notice, write down the main research question that the source material answers. A good research question should be open-ended.
4. Make a list of the key ways the research answers the question. Make sure your answers account for both the contradictions and repetitions you discovered. Turn these answers into “categories.”
5. Create a grid using authors’ names and categories as organizing features.
6. Fill in the grid with details from source material.

1. Planning a Synthesis Paper (cont'd)

Sample Literature Review Grid of Common Points

Research Question: What role does capital punishment play in American society?

Possible Answers: Capital punishment plays the roles of deterrence, revenge, oppression, and political leverage.

Author's Names	Deterrence	Revenge	Oppression	Political Leverage
Author A				
Author B				
Author C				
Author D				
Author E				
Author F				

↑ *In the blank boxes above, the writer would write down what each author said about each category. Some boxes might be blank, but the more complete the writer can make the boxes, the more well developed the final paper will be.*

⇒ **TIP:** When creating your grid, avoid creating only two categories. Try to create categories that represent concerns that get repeated again and again in the source material.

2. Writing a Synthesis Paper

Once you have completed a grid of common points, you can begin writing your paper. When you begin to write the body of the paper, you may want to follow these steps:

1. Select one common point and divide it into sub-topics that represent paragraph size “chunks.”

For example, capital punishment literature on the issue of deterrence has the following sub-topics: (1) the public’s impression that capital punishment does deter crime, (2) researchers’ impressions that capital punishment does not deter crime in most cases, and (3) researchers’ impressions that capital punishment can lead to more crime.

2. For each “chunk” create a topic sentence that both (1) *synthesizes* the literature to be discussed and (2) *describes* the literature to be discussed. Here are some *example topic sentences*:

Much of the literature points out that while capital punishment does not deter crime, most Americans still believe that it does deter crime.

(The first highlighted section synthesizes the literature, the second highlighted section describes the literature).

Not only does the literature agree that capital punishment does not deter crime, some literature suggests that capital punishment may in fact cause more crime.

(The first two highlighted sections synthesize the literature and the third highlighted section describes the literature.)

3. Support the topic sentences you created in #2 with quotes and paraphrases from source material. As you incorporate source material, make sure to use clear transitions that relate the sources to each other and to your topic sentences.

(For more information about using and citing sources in text, see the Center’s handouts on MLA format, APA format, and integrating sources.)

3. Recognizing Synthesis

The following are two parts of a student's literature review. The first example is an early draft of the literature review. The second example is a revised version. Notice how the student's revision makes better use of synthesis at both the paragraph and sentence level. The revised example is also more accurate in its portrayal of the literature.

Unrevised Paragraph:

Much of the literature agrees that capital punishment is not a crime deterrent. According to Judy Pennington in an interview with Helen Prejean, crime rates in New Orleans went up in the eight weeks following executions. Jimmy Dunne notes that crime rates often go up in the first two or three months following an execution. "Death and the American" argues that America's crime rate as a whole has increased drastically since the re-instatement of the death penalty in the 1960s. This article notes that 700 crimes are committed for every 100,000 Americans. Helen Prejean cites Ellis in her book to note that in 1980 500,000 people were behind bars and in 1990 that figure rose to 1.1 million.

Revised Paragraph(s):

The literature on capital punishment suggests that it fails as a deterrent in two key ways. First, much of the literature suggests that capital punishment does not lower the crime rate. Helen Prejean, in *Deadman Walking*, clearly notes that capital punishment does little to lower the crime rate. Prejean argues that the "evidence that executions do not deter crime is conclusive [...] the U.S. murder rate is no higher in states that do not have the death penalty than those who do" (110). Prejean's point is reiterated from a historical perspective in "Death and the American." Here, the author notes that despite the social and economic upheavals that occurred from the 1930s to the 1960s, the crime rate barely changed (2). However, after the reinstatement of the death penalty in the 1960s, the author notes that "crime rates soared" (2). Steven Hawkins points out that law enforcement officials also agree that the death penalty has failed to stop crime. He explains that a 1995 Peter D. Hart Research Associates survey found that police chiefs believe the death penalty to be "the least effective way of reducing crime" (1).

Some of the literature suggests that, in addition to failing to lower the crime rate, capital punishment can lead to more crime. In an interview with Helen Prejean, Judy Pennington notes that in 1987, the crime rate in New Orleans went up 16.3 percent in the quarter following eight executions (7). In *Deadman Walking*, Prejean elaborates on her position that capital punishment can be related to an increase in crime. She notes that in Canada in 1975, the murder rate peaked "one year before the death penalty was abolished" (110). Capital punishment opponents like Thurgood Marshall and Donald Cabana agree with Prejean that capital punishment has failed as a deterrent and cite similar statistical studies as evidence for this position (Fitzpatrick 3; Hawkins 1). Fitzpatrick also explains that Marshall would remind "us that the question with respect to deterrence is not whether the death penalty is a deterrent but whether it is a better deterrent than life in imprisonment" (53). The literature reviewed seems to overwhelmingly suggest that capital punishment is not the better deterrent.

4. Revising a Synthesis Paper

4A. Improving Synthesis at the Paper Level

1. Write down the paper's thesis or main research question.
2. Highlight the synthesizing topic sentence of each paragraph.
3. If a topic sentence is missing, draw a star (*) next to the paragraph.
4. Using pages 3 & 4 as guides, write topic sentences for every star.
5. If necessary, re-organize and combine source material to fit with new topic sentences.

4B. Improving Synthesis at the Paragraph Level

1. Select a paragraph to work with.
2. Highlight the topic sentence.
3. In every sentence highlight words that link the topic sentence and source material.
4. If links are missing, draw a slash (/) in front of the sentence.
5. Where slashes appear, add transitions.

Handout created by T.B. Henning—Updated February 2011

Sources Consulted include:

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"Death and the American." *The Economist* 21 June 1997: 1-2. Web. 1 Aug. 1997.

Fitzpatrick, Tracy B. "Justice Thurgood Marshall and Capital Punishment." *American Criminal Law Review* 32.4 (1995): 1-17. Web. 1 Aug. 1997.

Hawkins, Steven. "Death at Midnight...Hope at Sunrise." *Corrections Today* Aug. 1996: 1-2. Web. 1 Aug. 1997.

Pennington, Judy. "Helen Prejean." *The Progressive* Jan. 1996: 1-9. Web. 1 Aug. 1997.

Prejean, Helen. *Deadman Walking*. New York: Random House, 1992. Print.