Synthesising Information

Synthesising information is an important and complex skill required in academic writing. It involves combining ideas from a range of sources in order to group and present ideas, themes and issues in a logical manner. Synthesising is required in essays, literature reviews and other forms of academic writing.

Unlike summarising and paraphrasing, which use the ideas of one author at a time, synthesising combines ideas from more than one source and integrates them into your argument.

Synthesising allows you to:

- focus on the issues and ideas rather than authors
- combine information from multiple sources to develop and strengthen your arguments
- demonstrate that you've read widely on the topic
- use and cite multiple sources.

Steps for synthesising research into your writing

1. Brainstorm the issues related to your topic.
2. Read widely on the topic, focussing on the issues relevant to your assignment.
3. Make notes in your own words about what each text says about the issues.
4. Write an outline of what each text says about a particular issue or theme; group them together on the same page. This makes it easier to compare the content of the various texts. Include all references.
   - Look for common ideas in texts.
   - Use colours to highlight similarities.
   - List the similarities.
5. Decide on a logical order for the information and ideas you want to include in your writing.
6. Draft your paragraph(s) on the issue using your notes. Use a topic sentence to introduce the theme and then used the synthesised information to develop your ideas. Make sure you reference your sources.

The following example shows how several samples of information have been integrated into one paragraph about methods of giving up smoking.
Example
The majority of smokers have wanted to stop smoking at one or more times in their smoking history (Koh et al., 2008; Lee, 2010; Tanner & McKay, 2009). The addictive nature of smoking has not deterred smokers in their attempts to quit (Reid & Jones, 2009), and smokers have attempted a wide range of methods to break their addiction. While some have relied on willpower (Lee, 2010), others have sought assistance from the pharmaceutical industry (Reid & Jones, 2009; Tanner & McKay, 2009). Alternative methods of giving up smoking are also being explored by smokers. This is seen in recent studies reporting an increase in the use of herbal and other complementary medicines to address nicotine dependency (Koh et al., 2008; Lee, 2010; Reid & Jones, 2009). The effectiveness of these methods in assisting smokers in their attempts to give up smoking is investigated in the following sections of this report.

Example: Writing a synthesis from notes
This example illustrates how four ideas from four different sources are synthesised.

**Topic:** The leader is the most important element in the performance of a team.

1. Note the main points of each source. Remember to note the references
2. Look at the notes and identify similar and contradictory arguments. Group these together to develop and support your arguments
3. Cite references appropriately

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text 1 (Chia, 2010)</th>
<th>Text 4 (Skaftouros, 2012)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teams vary in role</td>
<td>- Comparing team performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of teams in Sweden</td>
<td>- Teams of the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Teams in small business operations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The way a team is established and prepared is critical to its successful performance. Skafthouros (2012) and Chia (2010) point out the importance of clearly defining a team from the outset, confirming that this is as important, if not more important, than the role of a leader. While the leader can add an element of organisation and clarity, these aspects can be implemented and planned at the outset by the team as a whole. In this way the team gains maximum cohesion and functions as a strong entity in the business world of today (Nguyen, 2011; Young, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text 2 (Young, 2011)</th>
<th>Text 3 (Nguyen, 2011)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teams blame the leader too easily</td>
<td>- Different role of leader and manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ways to solve problems</td>
<td>- Ways of training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-based learning</td>
<td>- Developing effective teams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>