



The Writing Lab

Synthesis of Research

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

One of the central goals for a research writer (and that is what you are) is to blend, or **synthesize**, different perspectives together. Sometimes these perspectives will agree with your main argument, and sometimes these perspectives will disagree with your argument. Regardless, synthesizing research means blending together different perspectives along with your own comments and analysis. The reason synthesis is important is because multiple perspectives can add credibility to your information. If you only present research that agrees with you, you look very much like you are “stacking the deck” and this perception can actually work against you. A good metaphor for synthesis is a piece of lasagna. Lasagna is made up of layers of various ingredients: noodles, cheese, meat, and sauce.



Like lasagna, a well-written research paragraph is made up of layers of various ingredients: topic sentence, source #1, your comments, source #2, your comments. The **[Layer #]** labels wouldn't actually appear in your final report. They are just temporary markers to show you the layers.

Here are some thoughts to keep in mind when it comes to synthesis:

- 1. Use a variety of different sources:** Your goal is to blend **different** sources together and not rely too much on one source. A great strategy is to assign a color to each of your sources. As you are writing your draft, highlight the research in its particular color. Then step back and see if one color dominates your report. You would need to add different perspectives to balance out your research.
- 2. Build your case when sources are in agreement:** Some students get anxious, coming to me and saying, “All my sources say the same thing.” Rather than being distressed by this, look at this as a positive. If you find 2, 3, 4 reputable sources that say the same thing, this should be a good sign. Take a little bit from each source and use transitions such as, “This finding was also discovered by _____” or “Another author who agrees is _____.”
- 3. Use sources only when you know where they come from:** A source is judged, at least in part, by 1) where it comes from and 2) how old it is. If you cannot answer these two questions, you need to give serious thought to whether or not you should use that source.
- 4. Have the last word in your paragraph:** Remember that each paragraph should begin and end with YOU. Don't just end a paragraph with someone else “speaking” (either in a text or as part of an interview or email message).
- 5. Put page numbers directly by the information coming from that page:** Don't wait until the end of the research and put something like this: (4, 6, 8). Put those pages (4), (6), and (8) directly after the information that **comes** from pages (4), (6), and (8).

Sample Research Paragraphs Using Synthesis

Layers have been specifically labeled to help you see them.
However, in the final document, the “Layer #” language would be removed.

Definition of a Gap Year

Layer 1: A Gap Year is not the same as taking a year between high school and college to goof off and stay out late. Nor is a Gap Year a time set aside for working and saving money for future education. Rather, a Gap Year is an orderly experience in which motivated young adults defer going to college immediately after graduating from high school for a significant amount of time. **Layer 2:** In “The ‘Review of Gap Year Provision’ Report” by Dr. Andrew Jones from the University of London, a Gap Year is defined as a specific amount of time between 3 and 12 months in which a person postpones education by participating in some type of structured activity (4). **Layer 3:** There are all kinds of “structured activities” in which young people can participate: traveling abroad, doing volunteer work, creating some substantial artifact (like writing a book, recording music, creating a collection of art), working in an internship or as an apprentice, and so on. Hannah, for example, has always loved reading her sisters stories and teaching them. Some young adults go to other countries to teach. Maddie, on the other hand, loves to build things, and there are many opportunities for young people to help build structures in other places. Not all experiences have to be international. Because of hurricane damage in the south, New Orleans and some of the more rural areas have been destinations for those pursuing Gap Year experiences.

Layer 4: However, in addition to helping out others, a Gap Year can help out the students participating. **Layer 5:** According to Jean Chatzky, author of “If Your Kid Wants to Find Himself, Just Say Yes,” “Encouraging an exploratory year off . . . may be the best way to guarantee that he’ll enter his freshman year with a clear sense of what he wants to do with his life, the ability to manage money and a better shot at graduating in 4 years” (1). **Layer 6:** These are both critical points: a Gap Year is not a Gap Year unless there is something substantial and meaningful going on. Sometimes this meaningful activity can occur half a world away and sometimes very close to home. However, Gap Years offer long-term and powerful benefits.

Popularity of a Gap Year

[Layer 1] While a Gap Year is a somewhat new concept in the United States, it has been popular in Europe, particularly Britain, for years. **[Layer 2]** In “Should You Take a Gap Year?” Christina Wood, writes that Gap Years first gained popularity in England around 1980. Tom Griffiths, founder and director of www.gapyear.com, said, “About 230,000 people between the ages of 18 and 25 take a Gap Year every year in the U.K.” (qtd. in Woods 2). **[Layer 3]** Just in the U.K. alone, almost a quarter of a million people take advantage of this opportunity *every* year. However, just because something is popular doesn’t necessarily make it a good idea. Do Gap Years have a proven track record? **[Layer 4]** According to Holly Bull, in “The Possibilities of the Gap Year,” the oldest organization in the United States that arranges Gap Years is the Center for Interim Programs, founded in 1980 by Bull’s father, Cornelius Bull. Bull has worked with over “3500 students,” placing them in Gap Year experiences. She also maintains a “database with over 4000 options worldwide” (1). **[Layer 5]** If people didn’t perceive genuine value to these kinds of experiences, I doubt they would have lasted for over 30 years and have so many placement agencies not only in Europe but across the globe. And that, of course, includes the United States.