

CHAPTER 8

Reading and notetaking: combining sources

Haven't we done this already? Well, yes, we looked at ways of taking notes in chapter 4, but now let's do some advanced notetaking that will allow us to write in a really high-quality academic style. We are going to look further at ways of reading, how to combine information and how to synthesize reading to create complex and interesting essays that will blow your professors socks off. And the best thing is, this is all easier than you might think – especially with a bit of practice.

There are just six steps for reading in this way;

- Previewing
- Annotating
- Outline, summarize, analyze
- Look for repetitions and patterns
- Contextualize
- Compare and contrast.

Many of these are skills that will already seem familiar from earlier chapters, but here we are going to step things up to a new level. You are about to become an expert reader and note-taker! So, let's take a look at each of these a little closer.

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Read some good, heavy, serious books just for discipline: Take yourself in hand and master yourself.



WILLIAM E. B. DU BOIS

1. Previewing

This is something we covered pretty well in chapter 4, but since it is so important, I'm going to repeat myself a little (not sorry). Before you even begin reading take a look at the basic information about the paper, ask yourself lots of questions – you might want to write them out at first, but soon they will become second nature in your head – and you will ask them about everything you read for the rest of your life, there is no escape once you have become a true critical reader! What does the abstract tell you? Is the author already known to you? If so, how does their reputation influence your thoughts about what you are going to read? What type of article do you have? Is it peer reviewed – that is one that other researchers have said is of academic quality – or is it a press article or something online? Is the material broken into parts, subtopics, sections? Another important area to consider is the date of publication, what was happening in the world that year that might change the way you read the article. For example, what technology was available, what was the political climate? – An article published before 1990 might be tied up in Cold War thinking. Or a piece about the internet published before 2004 won't have heard of Facebook.

2. Annotate

Now we get to more in-depth versions of what we were doing in chapter 4, where I told you about how to read with a highlighter. Well, perhaps that wasn't wise, because really, they are a short-cut to good reading, it is better to throw away your highlighter! (sorry about that). Highlighters can actually distract you from the learning. Those bright yellow lines you put on a page one day can become meaningless the next day, and remember, we are all bad at remembering. Using a pen or pencil, rather than a highlighter, will allow you to do more to a text. You can highlight key things, but still use the margins to make notes of ideas and thoughts, and to make links to class discussion, other texts or your essay topic. Doing it this way helps keep you awake, helps you to stay focused on why you are reading. And then later when you come to look back at your readings it helps avoid those 'what was that?' moments – Remember though, don't annotate the library books, instead photocopy pages or buy your own before writing notes on the page. Your notes won't help others, even if they are fantastic.

3. Outline, summarize, and analyze

Those notes in step two are all well and good, but the only way to know that you really understand a text is to be able to put it in your own words. You need to pull the text apart, and then rebuild it in your own words. This doesn't have to be too formal to start with. Outlining an article which you are reading is like doing the opposite of an essay plan – you are looking for the skeleton of the article. You should make clear notes about its thesis statement. Each point of evidence. And what its conclusions might be. Not all writers are as good as you, so it might take some hunting, but all this information is in there.



Summarizing is very similar to outlining, but now we use full sentences and paragraphs to achieve this. It is though still for your eyes only (very James Bond), and won't be appearing in an essay without a lot of editing. To really get good at reading and notetaking, and of course that is what we are aiming at, we need to add analysis – another word you hear a lot, but it isn't always clear what it means. Analyzing adds evaluation, it means not just restating the main ideas, but also testing them against other ideas. When analyzing a text, you decide how well (or badly) its argument has been presented by the author. You should look at the evidence that the author supplies to try and convince you, and then look for places where that evidence isn't strong enough or isn't well supported.

If you can see these strengths and weaknesses, then congratulations! You are now well on your way to becoming a great critical thinker and writer – but there are a couple more things to think about.

4. Look for repetitions and patterns

This can be an easy one. We all have that friend who keeps repeating a joke or comment until everyone acknowledges then, well writers can do



The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

the same. Look at the way language is chosen, positioned and repeated, this can tell you a lot about what an author thinks is most important, and it can also suggest to you their ideological position, their hidden agendas or their biases. When you see repeated words, phrases, types of examples do make a note of them, this will help you to better summarize the author's work.

5. Contextualize

Phew! We are getting there with our advanced reading techniques, but we are still not quite ready to use these notes for writing. Once you've finished reading and annotating, try thinking about the text from other perspectives. There is more on this in chapter 4, but simply when you contextualize, you essentially look at the text again (yes, again!) and consider how it might be shaped by historical, cultural, material, or intellectual circumstances – this is clearly linked to step one, but now you have read the text fully. Do these factors change, complicate, explain, deepen or otherwise influence how you view a piece? This is also related to noting the date of the text, and the type of publication. Also examine the reading through your own experience. Your life and past experiences will have a big influence on how you understand the text, or how much you like it, and while few essays ask you for your own opinion, thinking about the text this way will help highlight your own biases and prejudices as you begin writing. As we will see in chapter 9, this is very important even if we don't get to write about it, as philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin said.

Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social existence what oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour machine oil over it; one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints that one has to know

WALTER BENJAMIN



6. Compare and contrast

Finally, the last step, then we can do some seriously good writing. Once you have read a few different texts you need to see if you can find any relationships. Which of the texts share ideas? Which ones oppose each other? What are the general themes? If you are looking at texts your professor has given you, how does the order you were asked to read them change

your thinking? They will almost certainly have a plan in mind when they choose the order of your readings – can you work it out? How has your thinking been altered by this reading, or how has it affected your response to the issues? Again, make sure you make some good and clear notes here. It doesn't matter which method of notetaking you use, and they don't have to be really long, but to write a good essay you must start noting how things fit together – and that also makes the next step much much easier!



Annotated bibliographies

Sometimes you might be asked to combine these skills to make an annotated bibliography (or you might think it is useful for yourself). In an annotated bibliography we make a list of the references for each thing we have read, and under that we write about 250–300 words that discuss that text. We would use that short paragraph to talk about all those things listed above; an outline, context, patterns, credentials of the author, comparisons, and so forth. These can make really useful notes for writing an essay.

Turning notes into essays: summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing

The time has come! The preparation is done, your notes are made. Go and make a large cup of tea. Turn off (or turn on if you prefer) the radio. We are going to start writing. This is the fun bit, the creative bit, you're like the Hannah Höch of writing, a collagist bringing ideas together from everywhere to create a new masterpiece! But hang on, many students still find this process of incorporating other sources or 'voices' into their writing difficult, but this is what we need to do. Your professor wants to see a range of sources to support your views and ideas.

So, before you start, look back at chapter 4 at the two main ways you can include someone else's ideas into your work using proper citations – those are of course direct quotation (transferring exact words) and indirect reporting (such as paraphrases and summaries). As we said before, you should always be looking for a combination of these types, along with some of your own voice (see chapter 9 for more on that). And provided you have been taking good notes while reading, then the next stages of using these quotes and indirect reporting will be much easier. The first step is to look back at those notes and texts and decide in which way we will include information from them in our essay. There are three basic ways to do this:

• Summarize • Paraphrase • Synthesize

Summarizing

A summary is a shortened version of the original text. It should contain the main points of the original text but in a condensed version. It should be written in your own words. The source should, of course, be acknowledged. A summary should start with a clear opening about the type of work, title, author, and main point of the article and this should be in the present tense. You should not put any of your own ideas, opinions, or interpretations into the summary (sorry, we aren't interested in them here). In a summary we only care about what the text says.

You've already noted the key points, so now, while it might seem unfair on the writer of the text, you should delete most details, examples and unimportant information. You should keep any specialist vocabulary, but you can change the structure of the text. Changing adjectives to adverbs to nouns to verbs, make longer sentences shorter and shorter sentences longer (you're an academic DJ). Use conjunctions and adverbs (see later in this chapter) to join your ideas together combining paragraphs to make a continuous piece of writing. To do a good summary you need to make sure you understand the original text. This also includes considering your purpose for using this text. Ask why you are using it. Is it to support your point or to criticize the text before?



Look at journal articles that have provided good summaries. These can help you to learn the skill of summarizing. The example below is a good place to get started:

Emmers-Sommer, T. M., & Allen, M. (1999). Surveying the effect of media effects: A meta-analytic summary of the media effects research in Human Communication Research. *Human Communication Research*, 25(4), 478–497.

Paraphrasing

Sometimes you may want to be a little more true to the text you have read, but you don't want to use a quote (remember those should be kept to a minimum). To do this we can use paraphrasing. You should limit paraphrasing to short bits of text – too much of it and your work won't look like your own. You still need to change the words and the structure of the original, but this time you keep the meaning much closer to the original. And, of course you still need to reference the work (obviously). Paraphrasing is really useful for helping you to clarify or restate an idea, and is essential for good academic writing, but be warned unsuccessful paraphrasing can end up looking like plagiarism, even if

you didn't do that on purpose (EEK!). Take a look at our things to avoid below to help with this;

AVOID

When paraphrasing, there are a few common mistakes you should learn to avoid:

- × Don't just swap words or the order of sentences, you need to rewrite the work in your own words completely (although keep specialist language).
- × Don't forget to put a full in-text citation for the work or works you have taken the ideas from.
- × Don't forget to include quotation marks around any terms or phrasing that you have borrowed from the author, and then add the page number of where this quote came from.

Synthesizing

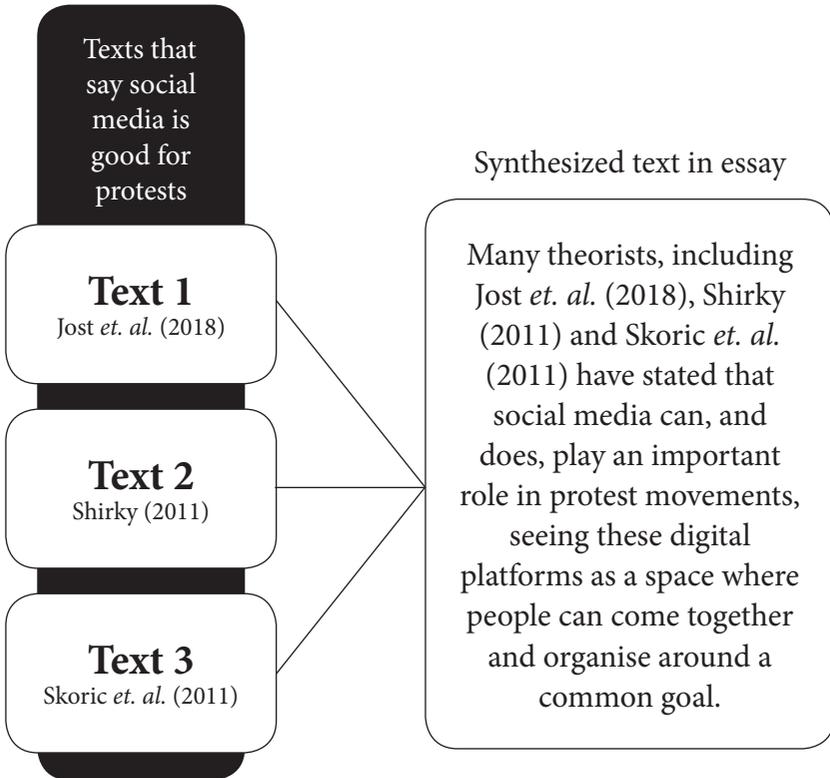
Summarizing and paraphrasing are very useful tools, but to really write a fantastic piece of work we need to look at synthesizing. This is when you combine several texts into one, usually shorter, piece of writing. Synthesizing is an important, but complex skill required in academic writing. It involves combining ideas from a range of sources in order to group and present common ideas or arguments, it also cites multiple sources. There are two main ways of synthesizing, bringing together similar ideas, and bringing together contrasting ideas. This is where you become a fantastic writer – it really doesn't get any better than this!

Synthesizing a similar idea:

Once you have done sufficient readings (how many is that I hear you ask – well it's enough when you start to see patterns emerging in the opinions and ideas of authors). You will see that there are many authors who say similar things, but it becomes rather boring for the reader if we just keep listing authors and stating that they say the same thing, and you don't want to be accused of being boring. So, instead we can use some shortcut and clever writing to be able to bring those ideas together into a succinct and solid sentence or paragraph.

In this example, we have read three texts, all of which discuss the way in which social media has been used in protests as a useful tool. In our notetaking we have put these texts all together as sharing an idea and now we want to tell our readers about these ideas by synthesizing them into a short sentence:

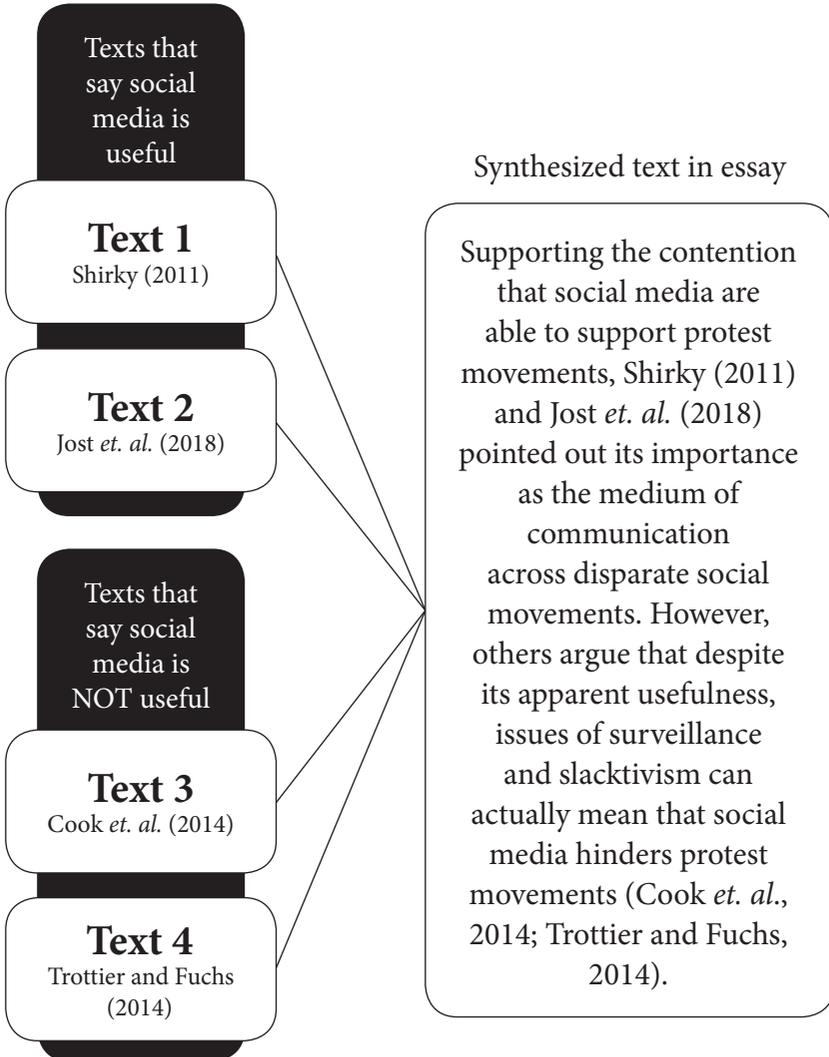
Notes from reading



Synthesizing contrasting ideas

Now we are going to write a more complex pair of sentences that contrast two sets of readings. From our notes we can see that we have two texts that believe that social media is useful for protest movements, and two that say that it is not so useful, or even problematic. See how the synthesized text reflects these two different opinions:

Notes from reading



Now, let's look at one last example where we pull together all our notetaking, summarizing, paraphrasing and synthesizing to create a complex paragraph. First, we need to look at the notes that have been made in preparation for this piece of writing:

Source	Main Idea	Quote	Page
Orwell, 1945	Language can corrupt thought.	But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better.	16
Koskela, 2012	Appearance and reality are the same.	For Heidegger, how a thing appears and the thing itself are interconnected for him and in many ways they are the same.	117
Lyon, 2015	Everyone is a victim of surveillance.	Snowden's work shows that everyone is susceptible to surveillance and anyone's life can unravel due to surveillance 'mistakes' and inadequacies.	139
Marx, 2016	Academics don't give solid answers.	Academics get splinters from fence sitting as a result of their culture or personality.	303
Dwyer, 2016	Our writing can make our fear about surveillance worse.	My intention has not been to generate more fear and panic over the changing conditions of personal privacy. On the contrary I have wanted to critically reflect on these broader transformations in media industries and media consumption practices.	182

Notes taken using a liner method

Now, take a look how these ideas have been used in the following paragraph:

Orwell was useful to Packard, he conjured up the perfect image of the duality between the watched and the watcher, but in a liquid surveillance world (Lyon, 2010) another of his texts becomes more useful; *Politics and the English Language*. Here **Orwell (1945)** writes, 'that if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should know better' (16). We could take this further, evoking Heidegger, it is the assertions about entities in the world that makes the relationship

between them (Koskela, 2012); the appearance of a thing, and the thing itself are interconnected, they are one and the same (*ibid.*). Yet, in writings on surveillance and privacy, it is often noted, even by the authors themselves (Dwyer, 2016; Marx, 2016; Lyon 2015), that the writing itself may well be creating the same fears and impotence that is ruinous to democracy.

(Specht, 2017)

Being able to synthesize is key to doing really good academic writing. It is a skill that takes practice and sometimes going through the step-by-step process can feel like it is really slowing down your writing. You will get quicker at these skills, but at first it is really important to leave enough time for your essay to ensure you can get through all the steps before you begin writing fully. As you get more practised these skills will start to become second nature. Having said that, all academic writers still go through these steps when working on their texts. This includes your professors and tutors and all the other writers of texts that you read.

The only way to get your writing as good as theirs is to give yourself time to use the same techniques as them, which means working hard to engage with critical reading, building on chapter 4 and then using the skills in this chapter to push things further. Then use the essay shapes and paragraph models and some synthesizing to really get your work to the highest levels.

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