What is synthesis?

Synthesis is the process of combining elements to create something new. When we synthesise, we develop new knowledge out of the ideas, debates, arguments, theories and points of view of others, ie out of existing knowledge. Synthesis involves choosing what is relevant, linking it to other points, and creating a coherent whole. Synthesis is not simply summarising. A summary is a condensed version of a passage or full article. Summarising involves using your own words to express another author’s ideas. A summary does not tell the reader how the ideas of the author whose work you summarised relate to the ideas of other authors who have written about the same topic. This, ie linking ideas across authors and readings is done through synthesis.

While you read, you should note key words, points and ideas, including any conflicts or contradictions across the readings with which you engage for the task at hand (e.g. an essay) and between the readings with which you engage for the task at hand and other relevant readings with which you engaged previously in the context of your programme of study. Identifying key words, points and ideas in each reading will help you synthesise by enabling you to bring these key words, points and ideas together.

Imagine that you need to include in your essay a synthesis of four sources relating to levels of parental involvement in education. Here is one way to do it:

A. Make a list of all the relevant key words, points and ideas that you have found in each source. Make sure that you include the page number for each key word/point/idea so that you can find it easily later on.

B. Organise the items across your four lists into categories.

Say that the categories that emerged from your four lists of key words, points and ideas relating to levels of parental involvement in education are:

- Staying informed (by reading newsletters, attending parents’ nights, etc)
- Taking part in activities (such as chaperoning at school trips, sporting events, etc)
- Contributing to decision making (by making suggestions through relevant bodies such as working parties or the PTA)
- Contributing to the implementation of decisions (by taking responsibility for completing certain tasks)

You could organise the points and ideas from your four lists in a grid using the source names and categories as organising features. Do not worry if some boxes are blank.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Category 1 Staying informed</th>
<th>Category 2 Taking part in activities</th>
<th>Category 3 Contributing to decision making</th>
<th>Category 4 Contributing to the implementation of decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source A relating to staying informed. If you have not found any, go back to source A to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source A relating to taking part in activities. If you have not found any, go back to source A to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source A relating to contributing to decision making. If you have not found any, go back to source A to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source A relating to contributing to the implementation of decisions. If you have not found any, go back to source A to confirm that this is indeed the case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source B relating to staying informed. If you have not found any, go back to source B to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source B relating to taking part in activities. If you have not found any, go back to source B to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source B relating to contributing to decision making. If you have not found any, go back to source B to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source B relating to contributing to the implementation of decisions. If you have not found any, go back to source B to confirm that this is indeed the case.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source C relating to staying informed. If you have not found any, go back to source C to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source C relating to taking part in activities. If you have not found any, go back to source C to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source C relating to contributing to decision making. If you have not found any, go back to source C to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source D relating to staying informed. If you have not found any, go back to source D to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source D relating to taking part in activities. If you have not found any, go back to source D to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source D relating to contributing to decision making. If you have not found any, go back to source D to confirm that this is indeed the case and move to the next category.</td>
<td>Points and ideas from source D relating to contributing to the implementation of decisions. If you have not found any, go back to source D to confirm that this is indeed the case.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now you can see where sources connect and contradict each other within the categories you have identified. Following this grid with a mindmap could help you trace the links and relationships more easily.

The grid and mindmap can help you create harmony amongst the chaos of all the information that you have gleaned from the sources with which you engaged. Your next task is to rearrange the information that you have included in your grid and mindmap into a coherent section on the levels of parental involvement in education. Your subheadings in this section will be the categories that you used in your grid, not the four sources. What the reader needs is a discussion of each level of parental involvement, based on points and ideas from across the four sources, not a summary of what each source said about the overall topic of parental involvement.

The ideas outlined above come from the following source but have been adapted and tailored to the needs of our School of Education students:

http://www.bradford.ac.uk/academic-skills/resources/workshops/critical-analysis/synthesis/

For more guidance on synthesising, see:

https://www.temple.edu/writingctr/support-for-writers/documents/SynthesizingSources.pdf
https://my.sunderland.ac.uk/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=56688696
http://learninghub.une.edu.au/tlc/as0/as0-online/academic-writing/synthesising-evidence.php
https://www.llas.ac.uk/materialsbank/mb107/Paraphrasing_and_Synthesising.html