6. Synthesizing Information and Developing Arguments

If you are teaching students how to synthesize information and develop an argument, refer to:

- Video: Framing a Problem
- Video: Thesis Statements
- Video: Synthesis
- Video: Introduction to Logical Reasoning
- Video: Purpose and Value of Evidence
- Video: Using Quantitative Data

DISCUSSION TOPIC

Synthesizing Information

Can you think of a time where you had to synthesize information? Was it for a class or in your personal life? If it was for a class, did you have to follow any particular format (outlines, annotated bibliographies, etc.)? Now that students are aware of what synthesizing information is, have them spend a few days observing times that they need to synthesize information. Direct them to keep a log and be prepared to share with the class.

ACTIVITIES

Thesis Statements and Keywords

Create a set of imaginary thesis statements. Have students pick out keywords, develop a list of synonyms and related terms, and select a few databases appropriate for the topic. Have them provide reasoning behind their selections.

Tell students to search various keywords and synonyms in a library database and in Google. What did they discover about the importance of synonyms and multiple keywords in the databases? How about spelling in databases vs. Google? Also, have students look for alternative/suggested terms that would help narrow their topic. What effect does this have?

Have students work in pairs to swap thesis statements. Students should create a list of keywords and synonyms for their partners, select a few appropriate databases or other resources, and locate at least one source for their partner's project. Instruct students to utilize the Send/Share function in a search tool to send their partner a link or copy of the source.

Drafting

Using an outline not only helps your students apply structure to their paper, but can assist them in getting started. Instruct students to fill in the blanks of an outline template. Stress that they do not have to start with the introduction, which is where many students get stuck. Sometimes filling in the body of the paper helps a student solidify their introductory argument and conclusion.

Revising

Many students struggle with conveying ideas clearly through writing—yet are adept at these skills while speaking. Instruct your students to choose a partner and explain that one partner will give a brief description of their paper out loud while the listening partner takes notes. Invite students to switch roles and read their own paper (or sections of) aloud to their partner. Alternatively, have students swap papers. Instruct them to ask these questions: Does my description match the content of my paper? Do the sections of my paper flow together, or are there abrupt shifts in ideas? Are there gaps in my paper that need to be filled?

Synthesizing

Select one or more of the following activities to give your students practice synthesizing information.

- Ask students to pull out the central theme(s) of a sample passage you provide. Using the same paragraph, ask students to summarize the paragraph using their own words.
- Provide students with a few short passages and have them synthesize the information into one paragraph.
- Ask students to compile ways in which a few research articles (with different premises and/or data) could be used together in a final paper.

Free Writing

Organize your students into groups of 4 to 5. Assign each group a topic, or allow them to choose one. Explain that you are going to allot a certain amount of time for them to write as much as they can about that topic—never letting their pen leave the paper. Stress that the quality of what they write is not important. The goal is quantity, to write down as many ideas that relate to their topic as possible. This will help students get accustomed to putting their thoughts onto paper. Set a timer for 5 to 10 minutes. When your students are finished, they can compare notes with their group members. Ask some follow-up questions: Did all members think of the same ideas? What was different about the responses, and why did group-mates arrive at different conclusions or questions?