

CREATING ARGUMENTS

Your papers should have a balance between your own argument and the ideas of others. You can't assume your sources will make your point on their own. You need to have your own argument first, then use the sources to support it. But how do you do that?

In high school it's likely that when you wrote a paper, first you thought of what you wanted to argue, then found sources to support your claim.

At university it works differently. You can't come up with an argument until you've read your sources first. Your argument should be based on an analysis and synthesis of your sources.

Synthesizing is not the same as summarizing. Many students string some quotes or summaries of their sources together in their paper, but this doesn't give a sense of their own thinking about the topic. It puts too much emphasis on other peoples' ideas.

Summarizing involves thinking of each source as you read it, one at a time.

Synthesizing involves thinking of all your sources together and looking for common themes and patterns. That's how you can add your own analysis and thought.

How does this work? First, it helps to have a question in mind. If you haven't been given one, try to put your topic into the form of a question that you want to find out more about. Here I'll use the question "Does television violence lead to violent behavior in children?"

Now you need to find some scholarly sources to help you answer the question. Keep an open mind when you're reading and see what the existing research says, rather than deciding on an answer before you start. Read each source critically. What are the main points the authors are making, and what evidence do they give to support it? Briefly summarize the key arguments for each source in your own words.

It can help to use a chart or a matrix so you can see things at a glance. You find different ideas in different sources. In my example, one source points out that in Japan and Europe children watch just as much tv violence but commit less violent crime. Another says that in different regions of the US children watch the same levels of tv violence but have different levels of violent behavior. A third argues that many of the studies on tv violence take place in a lab, which doesn't reflect reality. And a fourth argues that tv violence is strongly associated with aggressive behavior in children.

Once your summaries are done, look at all the sources together and see what they have in common and how they are different. Clearly there isn't agreement on this issue among researchers, but two of my sources have similar arguments that people in different areas don't commit the same levels of violent crime even though they watch the same violence on tv. This is an example of a theme they have in common.

After I see what my themes are, I can decide on an answer to my question. Here, I have decided that I don't think there is a strong relationship between children's tv watching and violent behavior. That's my argument, based on what I read and synthesized from my sources. You might come up with a different argument, which is fine.

That's because what's important is how you analyze and think about your sources. I chose my argument because of the common pattern I found in my sources. I also decided that some sources were more convincing than others. The one that argued in favour of a relationship wasn't based in a research study like the others were. That's the kind of analysis you need to do of your sources to decide on your argument.

That's a fairly simple example, but the process of creating arguments by analyzing and synthesizing your sources is the same with more complex topics. Using this process ensures that your ideas are foregrounded rather than the ideas from your sources, and that your arguments are well-supported.

For more about how to make sure your arguments and sources are used properly when you write, and on how to read sources for arguments, see our other videos at library.wlu.ca/help/tutorials.

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