

Connecting Source Materials

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to draw connections between your source materials and apply those connections to your writing project. Specifically, this lesson will focus on:

1. Applying Critical Thinking to Research

Beginning writers sometimes attempt to transform a pile of note cards into a formal research paper without any intermediary step. This approach presents problems.

The writer's original question and thesis may be buried in a flood of disconnected details taken from research sources. The first draft may present redundant or contradictory information. Worst of all, the writer's ideas and voice may be lost.

An effective research paper focuses on the writer's ideas—from the question that sparked the research process to how the writer answers that question based on the research findings. Before beginning a draft, or even an outline, good writers pause to engage in critical thinking about their research.

This involves asking questions like:

- How has my thinking changed based on my research?
- Do I need to rework my thesis based on what I have learned?
- How do my sources help me answer my research questions?
- Have any additional questions or subtopics come up that I need to address?
- How do my sources complement each other?
- Where do my sources disagree with each other, and why?

A careful analysis of your research notes will help you reevaluate your working thesis and determine whether you need to revise it. Remember that your working thesis was the starting point—not necessarily the ending point—of your research.

You should revise your working thesis if your ideas changed based on what you read. Even if your sources generally confirmed your preliminary thinking on the topic, it is still a good idea to tweak the wording of your thesis to incorporate the specific details you learned from research.

2. Selecting Useful Information

When you conduct research, you keep an open mind and seek out many promising sources. You take notes on any information that looks like it might help you answer your research questions.

You will not use all of your notes in your paper, so begin by identifying the notes that clearly support your thesis. As you identify the crucial details that support your thesis, make sure you analyze them critically.

Ask the following questions to focus your thinking:

1. Is this detail from a reliable, high-quality source? Is it appropriate for me to cite this source in an academic paper? The support for your thesis should come from reliable, reputable sources. If most of the details that support your thesis are from less-reliable sources, you may need to do additional research or modify your thesis.
2. Is the link between this information and my thesis obvious, or will I need to explain it to my readers? Remember, you have spent more time thinking and reading about this topic than your audience. Some connections might be obvious to both you and your readers. More often, however, you will need to provide the analysis or explanation that shows how the information supports your thesis. As you read through your notes, jot down ideas you have for making those connections clear.
3. What personal biases or experiences might affect the way I interpret this information? No researcher is 100 percent objective. We all have personal opinions and experiences that influence our reactions to what we read and learn. Good researchers are aware of this human tendency. They keep an open mind when they read opinions or facts that contradict their beliefs.



It can be tempting to ignore information that does not support your thesis or that contradicts it outright. However, such information is important. At the very least, it gives you a sense of what has been written about the issue. More importantly, it can help you question and refine your own thinking so that writing your research paper is a true learning process.

3. Drawing Connections between Sources

As you find connections between your ideas and information in your sources, also look for information that connects your sources:

- Do most sources seem to agree on a particular idea?
- Are some facts mentioned repeatedly in many different sources?
- What key terms or major concepts come up in most of your sources?

Look for subtler ways your sources complement one another, too:

- Does one author refer to another's book or article?
- How do more recent sources build upon the ideas from earlier sources?

You will also want to be aware of any redundancies in your sources and determine how you will address any contradictions found among different sources.

IN CONTEXT

If you have amassed solid support from a reputable source, such as a scholarly journal, there is no need to cite the same facts from an online encyclopedia article that is many steps removed from any primary research. If a given source adds nothing new to your discussion and you can cite a stronger source for the same information, use the stronger source.

Alternatively, if one source cites a startling fact that you cannot confirm anywhere else, it is safe to dismiss the information as unreliable. However, if you find significant disagreements among reliable sources, you will need to review them and evaluate each source. Which source presents a sounder argument or more solid evidence? It is up to you to determine which source is the most credible and why.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that you will need to **apply critical thinking to research** in order to revisit your research questions and working thesis as you transition from the research phase to the writing phase. You also learned, since you will not use every piece of your research, it is important that you take time to **select useful information** and **draw connections between sources**. Identifying these connections will help you identify important ideas to discuss in your paper.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Critical Thinking and Research Applications" tutorial.