Note-Taking for Synthesis

Research shows that the most successful writers spend substantial time and effort time planning and engaging with sources long before they start writing.[1] However, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the research process.

This handout helps writers organize their sources, synthesize authors, find connections between sources, and generate a complex thesis. The note-taking steps outlined in this handout can be used for planning a variety of synthesis papers in the humanities, such as research papers, literature reviews, and the 76-101 synthesis assignment.

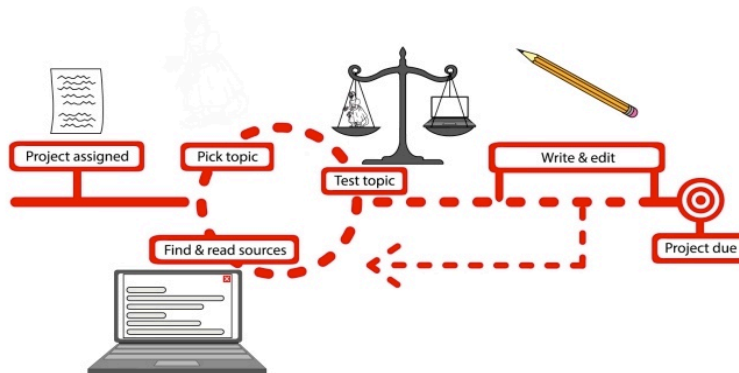Keep in mind that the writing process is **recursive, not linear.**

Figure 1: Processes of Writing[2]

1) **DEFINE A RESEARCH REALM**
    Determine your field of research for a particular assignment.
    - Does the assignment have any research/content requirements?
    - What question do you want to answer by the end of this assignment? What do you want to learn?
    - What topics have interested you most from your class readings?
    *Keep in mind that your research realm may change as you gather more information.

    Example: *Let's pretend a student, Maria, has been given a research paper on time management. In this scenario, "time management" is a very broad topic, but Maria decides that she wants to learn more about the subject as it pertains to university students.*[3]

2) **CONDUCT EXPLORATORY RESEARCH—ORGANIZE NOTES BY AUTHOR/TEXT**
    Once you have determined your research realm, start gathering related sources. Reliable resources for information include: CMU reference librarians, library website and databases,

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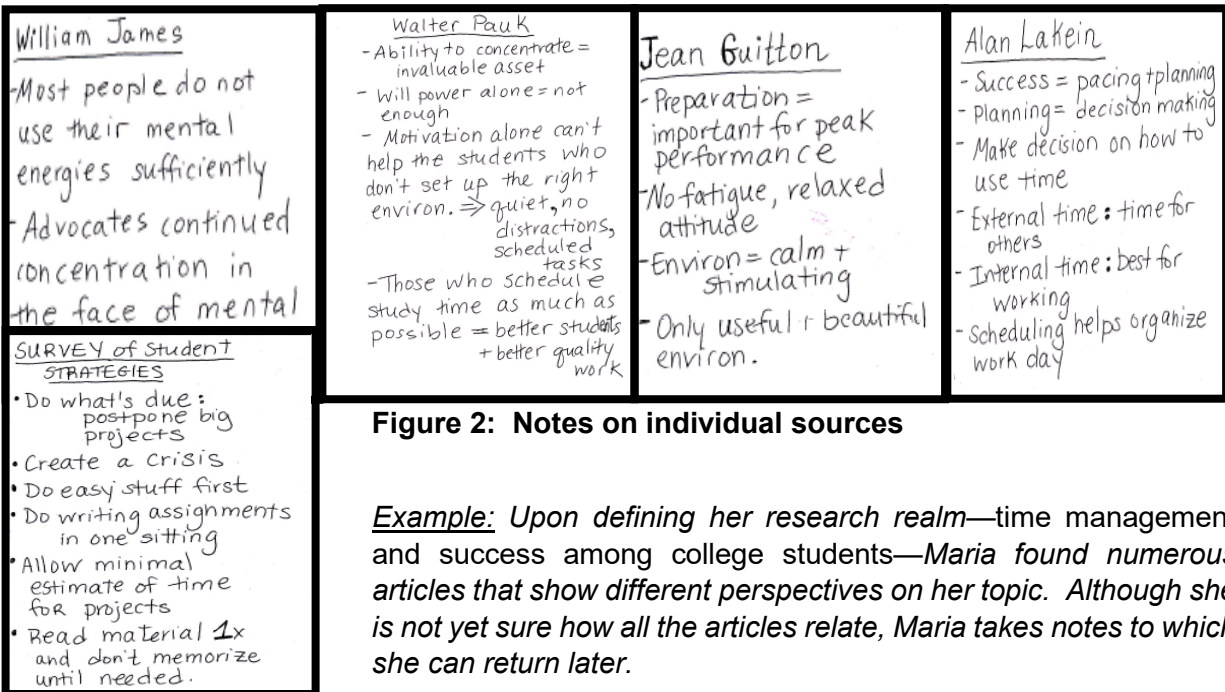[1] (Kennedy 1985, Higgins 1993)

[2] NC State University Libraries "Picking your Topic *is* Research." Anne Burke, Kim Duckett, Daria Dorafshar, Mara Mathews, Jason Evans Groth, Andreas Orphanides, Sarah Craig, Jennifer Garrett, Adrienne Lai.

3 For help narrowing down your research realm, refer to the GCC's *Picking a Research Topic* handout

Google Scholar, etc... Upon gathering sources, begin taking notes on each text as it relates to your research realm.

Depending on your assignment and topic of choice, your notes can consist of:

1) Analysis of each author's main points. This can include an evaluation of or response to the author's ideas
2) Repeating keywords, phrases or claims
3) Relevant conflicts that are brought to the reader's attention
4) Summaries of each author's main points

Figure 2: Notes on individual sources

Example: Upon defining her research realm—time management and success among college students—*Maria found numerous articles that show different perspectives on her topic. Although she is not yet sure how all the articles relate, Maria takes notes to which she can return later.*

3) **LOOK FOR CONNECTIONS AND BREAK RESEARCH INTO THEMES.**

As you do your research, begin to look for different connections between your collected sources. Ask yourself: How are these authors in conversation with each other? What do they agree or disagree on? Why?

Look for:

- recurring claims
- common topics
- popular issues of debate
- similar or different opinions

The recurring issues and topics that you find can then be grouped into "themes" that connect the various sources.

Example: After taking her initial notes in **Figure 3**, *Maria looks for the authors' opinions on similar topics. The notes are organized around these themes rather than on authors alone. Therefore, one and the same author, like Pauk for example, can be divided into several themes.*
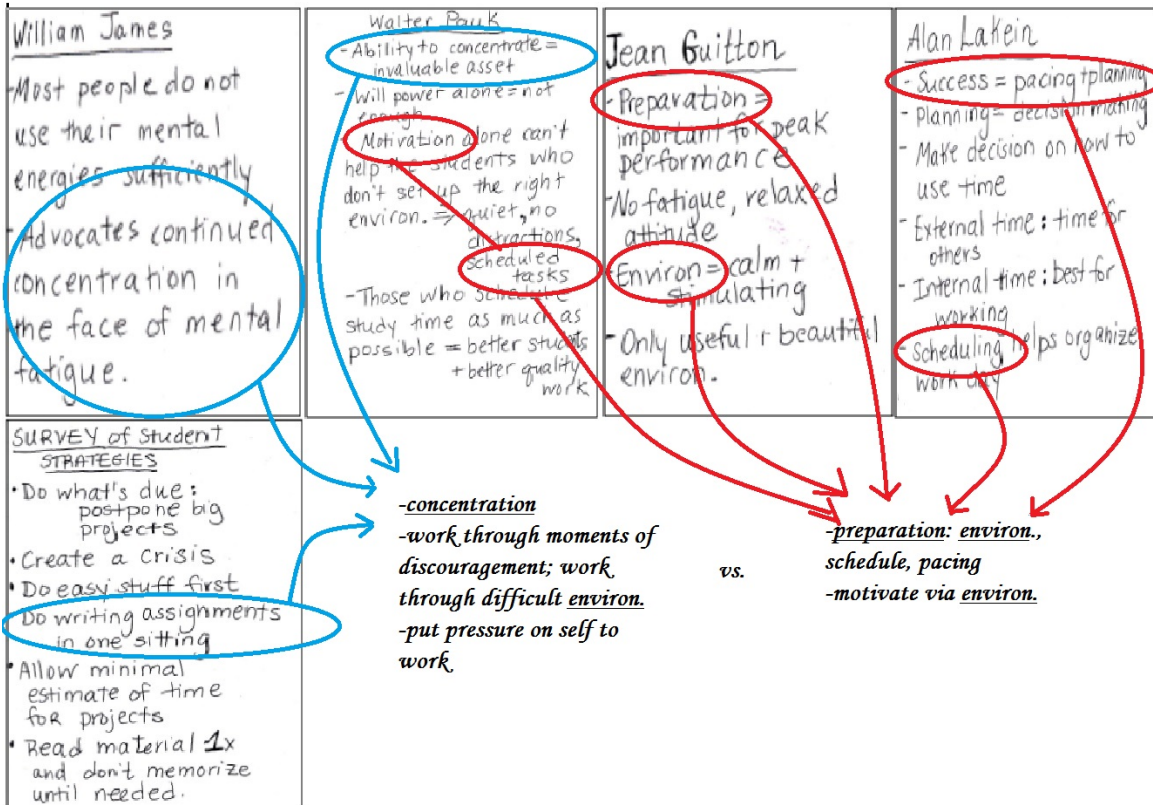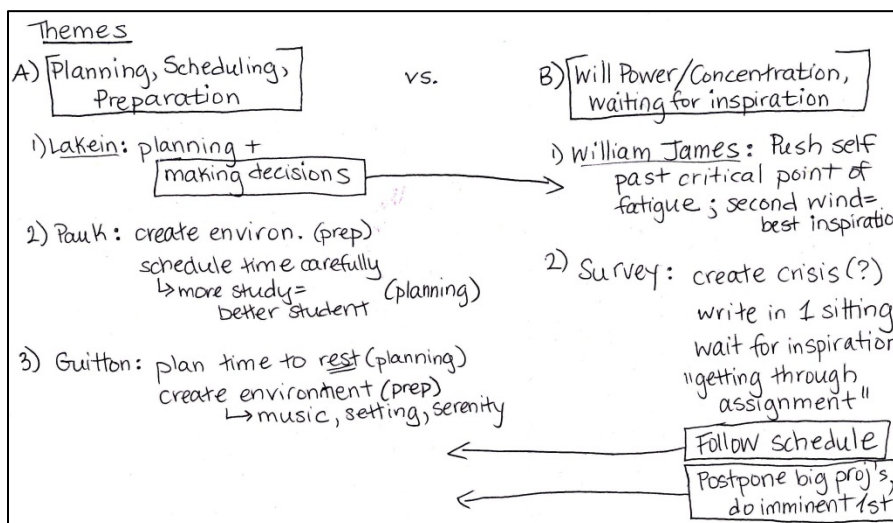
**Figure 3: Connections drawn from the initial source notes**

4) **RE-ORGANIZE YOUR NOTES AROUND THESE CONNECTIONS.**
   After you determine your themes, rearrange your notes to help you draw out the "conversation" the authors are having around each of the themes.

Note: During this stage you may encounter a "research block." You may lack information on certain themes or realize that you're interested in another topic. It's okay to start over, for this is a naturally occurring part of the research process.

Figure 4: Organizing notes by theme—Option A
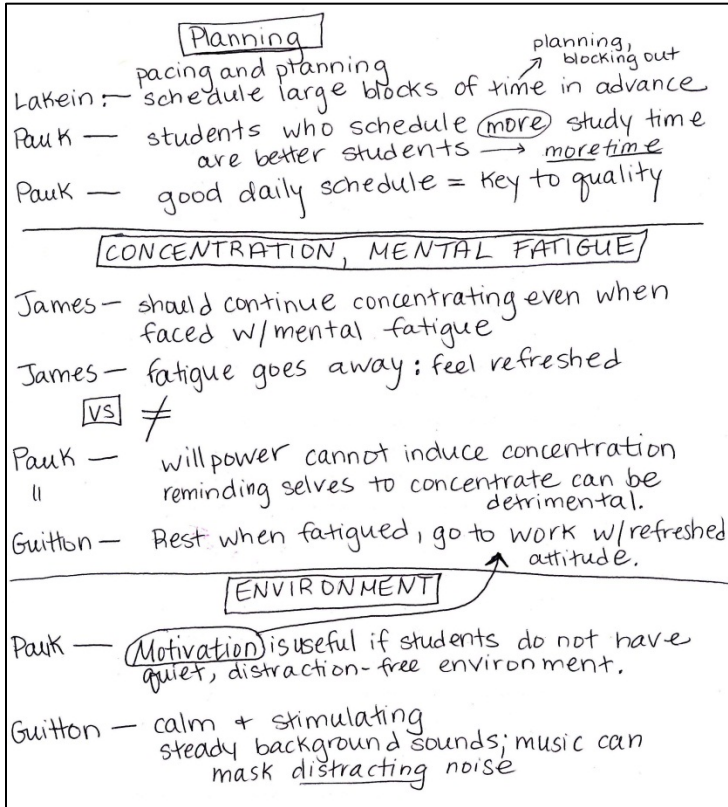
Example: Maria rearranges her notes on each author's claim according to the corresponding themes. **Figure 4** and **Figure 5** offer two different ways that Maria may organize her themes. Notice how the survey source is omitted in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5: **Organizing notes by theme – Option B**

5) **CONDUCT FURTHER RESEARCH WITH THESE THEMES IN MIND.**
You will now be able to do more focused research and have goal in mind for your reading. However, you may find that your original research question changes as you continue doing more research and redefining your themes.

6) **MAKE CLAIMS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN AUTHORS.**
Ask yourself questions such as:
a. What do these themes seem to suggest about the research question?
b. Is there a central argument or point of contention between these authors?
c. What do these themes have in common?
d. Why is this debate significant, or what is at stake? In other words, why is it important if one of these perspectives is correct?
e. Are the authors making any kind of assumptions about your research topic?

Example: Here we see Maria generating a claim about the significance of her research realm and the authors' conversation.

Figure 4: Notes on relationships between authors

Other relationships include:

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- Will-power and forced concentration versus planning, scheduling and preparation
- Internal factors (will power and concentration) versus external factors (time, environment
- Psychological factors (concentration and will power) versus physical factors (fatigue, stress, overstimulation)
- Study skills can be taught versus study skills must be known
- Uncontrollable inherent ability versus modifiable circumstances

7) GENERATE A COMPLEX THESIS BY FINDING THE PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUR THEMES.

What is the overarching or most important relationship between all of your authors? Your authors are all having a conversation: what trends do you notice in their conversation?
If your assignment requires it, situate yourself in this conversation. What do you have to say about the issue?

> Thesis: Although some academics may argue that good studying is a product of will power and forced concentration, others propose that effective studying is a result of careful planning, scheduling and preparation.

Figure 5: Final Thesis

Other variations to the thesis include:

Although some academics may argue that good study skills is a product of internal, inherent abilities, others propose that effective studying can be brought about by controlling external circumstances, most notably, managing one's time through planning.
Research demonstrates that time management techniques are of equal importance as intrinsic cognitive abilities to the study skills of college students.
While pedagogical research rightly emphasizes the importance of time management techniques, they mistakenly equate the importance of planning and scheduling a student's inherent abilities.
The reality of college student practices contrast sharply with the general consensus by researchers that time management techniques are of the utmost importance to academic success.