Synthesizing Sources
Entering the Conversation

We all draw on the ideas of others as we develop our own positions, regardless of the topic. Whether you are explaining your opinion about an issue specific to your community (such as whether to allow skateboarding in public parks), or you are developing a position on a national or global issue (such as whether to change immigration policies), you should know as much as possible about the topic. Rather than make a quick response that reflects an opinion based only on what you already know, you must research and read sources—that others have written. Then you can develop your own informed opinion, a measured response that considers multiple perspectives and possibilities. We call this process synthesis, which involves considering various viewpoints in order to create a new and more informed viewpoint.

Think of it this way: You show up at a party. There are a dozen different conversations going on. You approach one group of people who are having a heated debate. You'll need to listen for a while to understand what the specific topic is, what has already been said, who is taking what side, and what they're not saying. Then, by either expanding on what others are saying, challenging what others are saying, or filling in a gap in their understanding, you will begin to enter this conversation and make your own contribution. And that's what synthesis is all about: entering the conversation that society is having about a topic. You enter the conversation by carefully reading and understanding the perspectives and ideas surrounding an issue, examining your own ideas on the matter, and then synthesizing these views into a more informed position than the one you began with.

When you're learning about a subject, look for reliable sources. Be aware of the bias that a source brings to the topic. Consider the speaker: What does he or she believe in? How might the speaker's position provide personal gain? Don't look for a pro-and-con debate that represents only polarized views; look for a range of viewpoints. This might sound like a lot to keep in mind, but don't worry, you work with sources all the time. When you decide to buy a new cell phone, you gather information by exploring different sources. You might consult Consumer Reports and other technology magazines. You'd compare prices and technical specs. You'd
ask your friends for their opinions and experiences, and you might go to a computer store and talk with the experts. You might read reviews online or use forums as a quick source for many opinions. But you might not talk to your grandfather, who may be new to cell phones himself, nor would you get all of your information from a salesperson, who likely works on commission. The final result of your inquiry is a purchase, not an essay, but you just synthesized a range of sources in order to make the argument to yourself that the phone you chose is the best fit for you.

**ACTIVITY**

Write a brief paragraph about a time that you used multiple sources to help make a decision. You can choose something as simple as a decision about which movie to see or which shoes to purchase or as serious as which colleges to apply to. Discuss how each source contributed to your decision and how you decided which ones were more or less influential. You may consult written sources as well as more informal ones such as conversations.

**Using Sources to Inform an Argument**

As we discussed in Chapter 3, many different types of evidence can serve to support an argument. But it is important to remember that your sources should enhance, not replace, your argument. You may worry that the ideas of others are so persuasive that you have nothing new to say. Or you may think that the more sources you cite, the more impressed your reader (especially your teacher) will be. But as you develop your skills in writing synthesis essays, you will find that the sources inform your own ideas and demonstrate your understanding of opposing views. What you have to say is the main event; your position is central.

In the following example, Laura Hillenbrand, author of *Seabiscuit*, a Pulitzer Prize–winning book about a champion racehorse who beat the odds, maintains her own voice throughout even when she uses the work of experts to help make a point. (She identifies them in a section at the end of the book.) But whether she is quoting directly or paraphrasing, she never gets lost in the sources or allows them to overwhelm her ideas.

*from Seabiscuit*

**Laura Hillenbrand**

To pilot a racehorse is to ride a half-ton catapult. It is without question one of the most formidable feats in sport. The extraordinary athleticism of the jockey is unparalleled: A study of the elements of athleticism conducted by Los Angeles exercise physiologists and physicians found that of all major sports competitors, jockeys may be, pound for pound, the best overall athletes. They have to be. To begin with, there are the
demands on balance, coordination, and reflex. A horse’s body is a constantly shifting topography, with a bobbing head and neck and rolling muscle over the shoulders, back, and rump. On a running horse, a jockey does not sit in the saddle, he crouches over it, leaning all of his weight on his toes, which rest on the thin metal bases of stirrups dangling about a foot from the horse’s topline. When a horse is in full stride, the only parts of the jockey that are in continuous contact with the animal are the insides of the feet and ankles—everything else is balanced in midair. In other words, jockeys squat on the pitching backs of their mounts, a task much like perching on the grille of a car while it speeds down a twisting, potholed freeway in traffic. The stance is, in the words of University of North Carolina researchers, “a situation of dynamic imbalance and ballistic opportunity.” The center of balance is so narrow that if jockeys shift only slightly rearward, they will flip right off the back. If they tip more than a few inches forward, a fall is almost inevitable. A thoroughbred’s neck, while broad from top to bottom, is surprisingly narrow in width, like the body of a fish. Pitching up and down as the horse runs, it offers little for the jockey to grab to avoid plunging to the ground and under the horse’s hooves.

Jockey (video), Tel-Air Productions, 1980.

Rather than citing her sources within the text, Hillenbrand includes the information about the sources she cites at the end of her book. The first item is a videotape about the study by Los Angeles exercise physiologists and physicians; the second is an article in a medical journal. Both acknowledge that she turned to authorities—sources—to deepen and supplement her own knowledge about the mechanics and physics of how a racehorse and a jockey move as one entity.

**ACTIVITY**

In the following passage from *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, Gerald L. Early discusses the complex character of Jackie Robinson, the first black athlete to play in major league baseball. What is the purpose of the sources Early chooses to include? How do they enhance or detract from his own voice? What is the purpose of each of the notes documenting the sources?

from *A Level Playing Field*

GERALD L. EARLY

But 1949 was also Robinson’s year of liberation. According to Branch Rickey, known as the Mahatma by sportswriters, the Dodgers executive who signed Robinson and who pushed for integration: “For three years [that was the