

Preparing for the Synthesis Question: Six Moves Toward Success

In most college courses that require substantial writing, you are called upon to write **researched arguments** in which you take a stand on a topic or an issue and then **enter into conversation** with what has already been written on it.

The synthesis question provides you with a number of relatively brief sources on a topic or an issue -- texts of no longer than one page, plus at least one source that is a graphic, a visual, a picture, or a cartoon. The prompt will call upon you to write a composition that develops a position on the issue and that synthesizes and incorporates perspectives from at least three of the provided sources. You may, of course, draw upon whatever you know about the issue as well, but you must make use of at least three of the provided sources to earn an upper-half score.

What moves should a writer make to accomplish this task? Essentially, there are six: **read, analyze, generalize, converse, finesse, and argue.**

Read Closely, Then Analyze

First, you must read the sources carefully. There will be an extra 15 minutes of time allotted to the free-response section to do so. You will be permitted to read and write on the cover sheet to the synthesis question, which will contain some introductory material, the prompt itself, and a list of the sources. You will also be permitted to read and annotate the sources themselves. You will not be permitted to open your test booklet and actually begin writing the composition until after the 15 minutes has elapsed.

Second, you must analyze the argument each source is making: What **claim** is the source making about the issue? What **data** or **evidence** does the source offer in support of that claim? What are the **assumptions** or **beliefs** (explicit or unspoken) that **warrant** using this evidence or data to support the claim? Note that you will need to learn how to perform such analyses of nontextual sources: graphs, charts, pictures, cartoons, and so on.

After Analysis: Finding and Establishing a Position

Third, you need to generalize about your own potential stands on the issue. You should ask, "What are two or three (or more) possible positions on this issue that I **could** take? Which of those positions do I really **want** to take? Why?" It's vital at this point for you to keep an open mind. A stronger, more mature, more persuasive essay will result if you resist the temptation to oversimplify the issue, to hone in immediately on an obvious thesis. All of the synthesis essay prompts will be based on issues that invite careful, critical thinking. The best responses will be those in which the thesis and development suggest clearly that the writer has given some thought to the nuances, the complexities of the assigned topic.

Fourth – and this is the most challenging move – you need to imagine presenting **each** of your best positions on the issue to **each** of the authors of the provided sources. Role-playing the author or creator of each source, you need to create an imaginary conversation between yourself and the author/creator of the source. Would the author/creator agree with your position? Why? Disagree? Why? Want to qualify it in some way? Why and how?

Fifth, on the basis of this imagined conversation, you need to finesse, to refine, the point that you would like to make about the issue so that it can serve as a central proposition, a thesis – as complicated and robust as the topic demands – for your composition. This proposition or thesis should probably appear relatively quickly in the composition, after a sentence or two that contextualizes the topic or issue for the reader.

Sixth, you need to argue your position. You must develop the case for the position by incorporating within your own thinking the conversations you have had with the authors/creators of the primary sources. You should feel free to say things like, "Source A takes a position similar to mine," or "Source C would oppose my position, but here's why I still maintain its validity," or "Source E offers a slightly different perspective, one that I would alter a bit."

A Skill for College

In short, on the synthesis question the successful writer is going to be able to show readers how he or she has thought through the topic at hand by considering the sources critically and creating a composition that draws conversations with the sources into his or her own thinking. It will be a task that the college-bound student should willingly pursue.

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