



Preparing for the 2007 Synthesis Question: Six Moves Toward Success

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The Art of Argumentation

When I taught high school in my home state, West Virginia, I encountered a situation that teachers all over the world must deal with when they teach students how to incorporate sources in their writing. After several initial classes on searching for information (these were the pre-Internet days, so we headed directly to the library), narrowing the topic, and crafting a preliminary thesis, my students would return to the library and then come back to me with a familiar refrain: "I can't find anything that supports my thesis!" I didn't blame the students, of course -- they were just learning what it means to enter into the discourse of academic argumentation. As novices in this endeavor, they needed to learn that accomplished academic writers don't simply draw material from published sources as if the sources were maples being tapped for their sap. On the contrary, savvy writers **converse** with sources and **incorporate** (literally: em-body) them in their argument.

As AP English Language and Composition courses prepare students to encounter the new synthesis question on the free-response section of the exam, beginning with the 2007 administration, teachers will have the opportunity to teach these "moves" of academic writing in a way that will help students as they progress from high school to college. In most college courses that require substantial writing, students are called upon to write **researched arguments** in which they 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 will provide students 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 students 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. Students may, of course, draw upon whatever they know about the issue as well, but they 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, the writer must read the sources carefully. There will be an extra 15 minutes of time allotted to the free-response section to do so. The student 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. The students will also be permitted to read and annotate the sources themselves. The student will not be permitted to open his or her test booklet and actually begin writing the composition until after the 15 minutes has elapsed.

Second, the writer 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 students 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, the writer needs to generalize about his or her own potential stands on the issue. The writer 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, I think, for the writer to keep an open mind. A stronger, more mature, more persuasive essay will result if the writer resists 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 student responses, I predict, 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 -- the writer needs to imagine presenting **each** of his or her best positions on the issue to **each** of the authors of the provided sources. Role-playing the author or creator of each source, the student needs to create an imaginary conversation between himself or herself and the author/creator of the source. Would the author/creator agree with the writer's position? Why? Disagree? Why? Want to qualify it in some way? Why and how?

Fifth, on the basis of this imagined conversation, the student needs to finesse, to refine, the point that he or she 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 his or her 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, the student needs to argue his or her position. The writer must develop the case for the position by incorporating within his or her own thinking the conversations he or she has had with the authors/creators of the primary sources. The student 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 take up.

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The Art of Argumentation for Synthesis

1. Read

Annotate

2. Analyze

Claim?

Data or Evidence?

Assumptions or beliefs that warrant this evidence?

3. Establish a Position – Generalize

Look for nuances, the complexities of the topic

4. Converse

Each of the best positions for each of the authors

(conversing with the author/creator)

5. Finesse/Refine

Form a thesis and state it after contextualizing the topic

6. Argue the position

Use the primary sources and develop a case

Understanding the Rhetoric of the Synthesis Question:

Teaching the "Researched Essay," not the "Exam Answer"

Kenneth Burke's "parlor" metaphor-an invitation to "essay":

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* [Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1941], 110-11).

Noted Characteristics of the "Researched Essay":

- Assumes its readers are educated, curious adults
- Does not assume its readers have read a prompt or sources
- Must begin by contextualizing issue(s) at hand for readers
- Should have a "commitment" statement that does justice to the intellectual robustness of the issue(s) at hand
- Should feel free to take conscious inventory of what might be said in support of the commitment statement
- Should acknowledge possibilities of opposing views
- Must provide context for any secondary source material it quotes or cites, rather than simply dropping it into the discourse
- Can feel free to say implicitly to its readers, "Let's think through this together," so structure does not need to be marching "like Sherman through Georgia"
- Can certainly use first-person at will