

The Synthesis Essay

15 minutes for reading; 40 minutes for writing

What does the synthesis essay require of me?

You will be presented with a description of an issue along with a selection of sources that address the topic and may include nonfiction, fiction, poetry, drama, photos, charts, art work, or cartoons. After carefully reading and annotating the sources, you will respond to the prompt with an essay that incorporates at least three of the sources in support of your position on the subject. The College Board uses this essay to determine how well you are able to investigate a variety of sources, both print and visual; choose which of these sources to include in your presentation; and respond to the sources and discuss how they relate to your position on the topic. In short, you will demonstrate your ability to develop a “researched idea,” using not only your personal viewpoint, but also the viewpoints of others.

What kinds of essays can I expect to write?

You may need to write an expository essay in which you develop your thesis and support it using compare and contrast, cause and effect, or analysis. Or, you might need to present an argument where you take a position on a topic while indicating the weaknesses of other viewpoints.

How do I decipher the prompt?

Carefully read and deconstruct the prompt. You will have to read the prompt more than once. Read all introductory material that will set up the situation and give you background. Also, read the assignment. Highlight important terms and elements that make your task clear.

How do I read and annotate the sources?

As you consider the sources, jot down ideas that you think you could use in your essay. Annotate directly on the sources themselves.

As you actively and critically read each print source, determine the following:

- Purpose/thesis
- Intended audience
- Type of source (primary, secondary)
- Main points
- Historical context
- Authority of the author
- How the material is presented
- Type of evidence presented
- Source of the evidence
- Any bias or agenda
- How the text relates to the topic
- Support or opposition toward your thesis

As you analyze visual text, you should

- Identify the subject.
- Identify major components (characters, details, symbols).
- Notice position and size of details.
- Decide whether the visual takes a positive or negative position toward the issue.
- Identify the primary purpose of the visual.
- Determine how each detail illustrates and/or supports the primary purpose.
- Consider whether the author indicates alternative viewpoints.

How do I decide which sources to use?

You must establish a position and choose sources that support and develop your position.

As you chose, think about the following questions:

- What is your purpose?
- Does one source lend itself to serving as a foundational source that you can use as the basis for your essay? If so, use this source as the center of your essay, utilizing the other sources as you refute or support the main source.
- Is the text background information or pertinent information?
- Does the source give new information or information that other sources cover?
- Is this information that will add depth to the essay?
- Does the text reflect the viewpoints of any of the other texts?
- Does the text contradict the viewpoints of any of the other texts?

- Does the source support or oppose your claim?

Once you have selected your sources, pay no attention to the ones that you have eliminated. Review the notes you've made on your chosen sources, and select short, powerful quotations that will strengthen your position. Decide how you will analyze and comment on the excerpts from the sources.

How do I plan my essay?

1. Understand the prompt. Know your purpose for reading and what your essay needs to accomplish.
2. Read the sources to become informed about the topic and to note key ideas and issues related to the topic.
3. Then, decide on your position and the major points of your essay. Jot down a few notes about how you are going to present your material. Simply create a brief listing of the major points you want to include and the order in which you will present them so that your argument develops logically.
4. Finally, choose which sources you will use to support your points. Be sure that you plan to incorporate at least three of the sources in your essay.

What should my opening include?

Make certain that your introductory paragraph introduces the subject and its context and clearly states your position on the issue

What should the body of the essay include?

Make certain that your major points

- relate to your thesis
- use specific examples (personal and otherwise)
- use selected sources to support the major point

Make certain that you incorporate sources into the development of your point by using

- attribution and introduction of cited sources
- transitions between and within paragraphs
- a mix of direct quotations, summary, and paraphrases

How do I conclude my essay?

End with a short paragraph in which you present your final remarks. This concluding idea is the last pertinent thought you want your reader to remember. Avoid a final paragraph that merely summarizes.

What are some things I need to keep in mind as I write?

- The synthesis essay requires you to be familiar with both analysis and argument.
- Don't be put off by the length or complexity of the introduction to the subject. You are the one who will choose your position and which sources to incorporate in your essay.
- You need to integrate the source material into the essay in a skillful manner.
- Cite sources appropriately, i.e. (Source C).
- Write in first person ("I").
- Write in present tense.

How do I pace myself?

15 minutes	Use the allotted 15 minutes of reading time by reading all three of the prompts, deconstructing the synthesis prompt, reading and annotating each of the texts related to the synthesis prompt, and deciding how you will address the synthesis prompt.
5-6 minutes	Revisit the texts and decide which you'll use in your essay.
8-10 minutes	Plan the support of your position.
20 minutes	Write the essay.
3-4 minutes	Check to make certain you've included at least the minimum number of sources and correctly cited each of them.
3 minutes	Proofread.
55 minutes	Total time on essay