

HOW TO WRITE A SYNTHESIS ESSAY

To SYNTHESIZE means to assemble parts into a new whole. The parts are the different sources, each representing a distinct view or views on a particular topic. The “whole” is your essay in which you explain your position, considering views from the sources that show both sides of the issue.

The synthesis essay is similar to the argument question, but it is more complex:

- The TYPE of thinking you are doing for the synthesis essay is often different from the argument essay. Whereas argument essays can often be more philosophical, synthesis essays are usually about a particular topic or issue. You are often asked to evaluate factors and to consider the implications of decisions —a thinking step beyond the traditional “defend, challenge or qualify/ take a position” task in the argument essay.
- You are required to synthesize information from the sources *into* your argument, either summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting directly from at least three sources. Remember that the sources won’t make your point. They provide supporting information, perspectives, viewpoints so that you can make your point.

Your synthesis will emerge as you complete the following steps:

1. **Read the Prompt.** You will read the synthesis prompt and think carefully about an issue. An *issue* is a conflict with different possible *resolutions*; a *resolution* is a position that considers various views and perspectives and attempts to reach a position that reconciles the differing views in some way. Make sure you carefully read the language of the prompt to see what your “task” or “purpose” is for this essay (i.e. identify factors, offer a recommendation, etc)
2. **Read & Evaluate the Sources.** You will read what THEY SAY (writers of the six to eight documents/sources) on this issue, in order to determine what YOU SAY on the issue.
3. **Write the Essay.** You will write an essay establishing YOUR POSITION and synthesizing information from at least 3 different sources to support your discussion. You should always include a discussion of the counterargument with a concession & rebuttal.

1. READ THE PROMPT

I. What Does the Prompt Tell You?

Be careful to read the entire prompt—they are often more complex than you think, and misreading the prompt is a common (and dire) mistake.

Topic: what is the prompt about? (What issue?)

Context: what (if any) useful background information does it give you?

Task/Purpose: what does it ask you to DO in your essay?

- Are you making a Claim of Fact (*identify or examine factors, outcomes, implications*), a Claim of Value (*evaluate, argue for/against, develop a position on an issue*), or a Claim of Policy (*offer a recommendation, develop a position on whether or not something should be changed*)?
- NOTE: Claims of fact, value, and policy often build on each other—especially with claims of value & policy, you most likely will have to make both in your argument—but it's important to recognize which type of claim the prompt is asking you to focus on.

II. What is Your Position on the Issue?

Recognize Complexity: Many students receive lower scores on synthesis essays because they overlook the complexity of the prompt and take a simple position. An essay that cites three sources supporting only one view will not score above a 4. Why? Because an important goal of research and synthesis is to recognize complexity and to show an awareness of multiple views. This does not mean that you cannot take a definite position on an issue. It does mean that you should establish ethos (your credibility as a writer) by conceding to other views. A careful consideration of information given in the prompt can move you beyond the trap of superficial, one-sided thinking.

Factors: What factors should be evaluated before selecting the best position? Remember that, in the synthesis, even if factors/evaluations are not directly mentioned, you are expected to consider them in your discussion of the issue.

Consider your Tentative Position: Now that you have identified some of complexities in your analysis of the prompt, formulate a tentative position on the issue—your guess of what you might argue AFTER reading the prompt but BEFORE reading the sources.

2. READ THE SOURCES

In the interest of time, you may need to scan the sources quickly to choose the ones which will be most useful to you. It is important, however, that you understand the complete argument made in your selected sources so that you won't misrepresent a source by taking a quotation out of context.

I. Annotate as you read, making notes in the margins for:

Source Info: Does the title of the source and/or information about the author (if given) imply a particular interest or position? If the source occurs in a larger work (magazine, journal, website, newspaper), does this work imply a particular interest or position? Could the date be a factor in using the source information?

Argument/claim(s): Underline major points, considering whether or not it contributes to your argument.

Evidence: Underline relevant statistics, results, or examples used to support claims.

Quotes: Underline and star (*) important or compelling quotes that could clarify or support a position, illustrate the complexity of the topic, and/or question or contradict a claim made in a previous source.

NOTE: With graphs and visuals, you may have to draw conclusions from the information given or the details of the visual.

II. Distinguish Viewpoints & Group Sources Together

Keeping your PURPOSE in mind, begin to group the sources together as you identify the distinct claims in each. Source analysis should go beyond merely categorizing sources as “for” or “against” a particular position. Each source has a variety of information that may be used in different ways (some even just as background to assert your ethos on the topic in the introduction). Once you choose which views will become focal points in your synthesis essay, you should then select the best evidence from the source group that supports these views.

3. WRITE THE ESSAY

I. Writing a Thesis Statement

Now that you have considered the sources, refer back to the tentative position you wrote after analyzing the prompt. Do you now have specific reasons to support the position you took? Will you revise or add a qualification to this position? Or will you change to a completely different view? ALWAYS keep your PURPOSE in mind, thinking about what kind of claim(s) the prompt is asking you to make. Below are three possible formats you might use to write a thesis statement.

Position which makes a qualification:

- *While* _____, _____.
(counterargument) (my position)

Position which takes a stand and offers supporting points:

- _____ *because/in order to/so that* _____.
(clarification of my position) (supporting reasons)

Position which argues the importance of considering certain factors/implications before making a particular decision:

- *Before deciding to* _____, [*person/institution*]
(limit, maintain, expand)
should consider _____.
(factors/implications)

II. Structuring your Essay

While the AP exam does not have any “prescribed” form for its essays, here are some recommended ways to structure your synthesis essay.

Introduction: Possible strategies include using a relevant personal anecdote, addressing the counterargument & making a concession & rebuttal (esp. when it is not addressed in the body paragraphs), or providing a claim about the significance of the issue/topic.

Body Paragraphs: Your body paragraph structure will be determined by your PURPOSE—by what kind of overall claim you are being asked to make in the essay prompt.

Claim of Fact (*identify or examine factors, outcomes, implications*) You may not have an entire paragraph for a counterargument here because you are simply presenting a holistic view of the most important factors, outcomes, or implications (in this case, it makes sense to include an argument for other possibilities—counterargument—in the introduction or conclusion. Structure them by factors, outcomes, or implications; be sure to also point out their relationships to each other (they may represent contrasting views).

Claim of Value (*evaluate, argue for/against, develop a position on an issue*) Structure body paragraphs by different supporting points for your argument, making sure to also include an entire paragraph that addresses the counterargument and includes a concession and rebuttal.

Claim of Policy (*offer a recommendation, develop a position on whether or not something should be changed*) Structure body paragraphs by different supporting points for your argument, making sure to also include an entire paragraph that addresses the counterargument and includes a concession and rebuttal.

Conclusion: Reiterate the significance of the topic/issue, possibly look to the future.