

Six Moves to Synthesis Success

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 non-textual 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.

by David Jolliffe, former Chief Reader