

## Synthesis Essay Graphic Organizer

	What <b>claim</b> is the source making?	What <b>data</b> or <b>evidence</b> does the source offer in support of this claim?	What are the <b>assumptions</b> or <b>beliefs</b> (explicit or unspoken) that <b>warrant</b> using this evidence or data to support a claim?
Source A			
Source B			
Source C			
Source D			
Source E			
Source F			
Source G			

## Preparing for the Synthesis Question: Six Moves Toward Success

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 provides 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 calls 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 is 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 is a task that the college-bound student should willingly take up.

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