

## THE SYNTHESIS ESSAY

The synthesis essay is a new type of question for the AP English Language and Composition Examination, one of the three free-response questions. The College Board provides a sample of a synthesis essay and its scoring at [apcentral.collegeboard.com](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com).

This new question asks student writers to synthesize information from several types of sources in order to design and develop their own persuasive discussion of a topic. Students will have an additional reading period of fifteen minutes in order to manage the additional reading for this question. A typical writing time will be forty minutes.

Students will read several related sources and then respond to a prompt that requires them to cite a certain number of sources (for example, at least three of six) in support of their argument.

The new synthesis essay has several goals.

- First, a student will have to comprehend several (five to seven) different sources. (Analytical and argumentative questions in the past have offered students one passage (or, occasionally, two passages) to comprehend and to which they would respond.)
- Second, a student will have to synthesize these different sources in a comprehensive, cohesive, and integrating manner.
- Third, a student may have to comprehend a chart, a graph, a drawing, a work of visual art, or another type of visual expression and would have to incorporate an understanding of that work or those works, if she or he so chose, into the essay. A student thus would demonstrate an understanding of the rhetoric of media besides the rhetoric of traditional nonfiction writing.
- Fourth, a student would have to attribute both direct and indirect citations.

The rationale for this new type of question comes from a need to assure colleges that students who receive Advanced Placement credit for English Language and Composition will have mastered the basic skills of comprehending and integrating multiple sources and different kinds of sources. Students would master these skills in a college composition course that serves as a college's fundamental training in analysis and argumentation.

For this question, students will have to integrate a variety of sources into a well organized, coherent, and well composed essay. They will refer to the sources in order to develop and support their position. As usual in AP English essays, students should avoid mere summary, paraphrase, or *précis*. The argument a student develops should be central to the essay, and the sources should support the argument. This centrality of the argument is not new in the AP English tradition. What is new is the number of the documents and thus the complexity of managing the sources in support of the argument.

Students will receive a topic for composition and will have fifteen minutes to read the several sources on that topic carefully. Students should make notes on the readings and visuals. As they read, they should develop an argument and consider how the sources relate to the argument. They should consider whether how each source would support the argument. Eventually, a student would write an essay that synthesizes information from a minimum of sources (say, three) and that defends, challenges, or qualifies a position defined in the assignment. Asking students to defend, challenge, or qualify a writer's position is a standard type of assignment in AP English Language and Composition: for the synthesis essay, students are drawing on multiple sources (and thus, positions) rather than one writer's position. And, as is typical in the scoring of such argumentative essays, readers have found that writers who tend to qualify tend to receive higher scores. (Note the qualification in the previous sentence. Qualifying does not necessarily result in a higher score. Qualifying an argument is typical of a complex thinker and writer whose complex treatment of a topic typically yields an argument that is more sophisticated and more accurate and thus is likely to be rewarded more by the AP reader.)

What makes a good synthesis essay response? As the name of the essay suggests, students must synthesize several texts (written or visual), some of which may differ in tone, purpose, or thesis. In a synthesis, a stu-

dent will bring the arguments (*theses*) together (*syn-*) to support an argument (*synthesis*) based on the several texts. Before we present a sample synthesis essay, here is some advice for this new question:

- Provide a context for the argument, which is the issue at hand.
  - The more extensive the context, the better.
  - Frame the argument, the issue.
  - Explain briefly the background or any analogous situations.
- Consider and treat the complexities, whatever nuances, ambiguities, paradoxes, or juxtapositions there may be.
- Transcend merely citing sources to evaluating how the sources support the student's own argument. Connect the sources to the argument.
- Students should have a level of comfort with sources and the conventions of documentation.
  - Such a level of comfort comes with repeated practice of working with sources.
  - If students feel intimidated by working with sources, they should be encouraged to enter a conversation with the sources, as Chief Reader David A. Jolliffe suggests.
- Choose examples thoughtfully in order to integrate them into the student's argument.
- Identify the implications and the impact of the argument for the citizenry.
  - Does this issue make a difference for citizens?
  - How should informed citizens think about such issues?
  - How does such a topic affect citizens? How does it affect the nation?
- Student responses will synthesize the sources and appropriately cite them. A student will combine the argumentative punch of the sources with the student's own thesis in order to create a cohesive, coherent argument, grounded in the sources.

## PRACTICING THE SYNTHESIS ESSAY

To prepare for writing synthesis essays, similar to those required by the Advanced Placement Language and Composition Examination, students should explore collections of texts on a common topic. As they focus on the question posed by an assignment, they should identify in the texts' connections, oppositions, and implications that are in dialogue with the question. Documented analysis essays require the same fundamental skills of logical organization and persuasive argument expected in essays that are not documented. With the writer's position and line of argument as the focus, references to secondary sources—the texts supplied with the question—help support and elaborate on the writer's arguments.

Two short guided lessons follow, the first for pre-AP students and the second for AP students. Encourage vertical teaming so that students practice synthesis essay writing, on their own level, prior to their enrollment in the AP English Language course. Use the two assignments that follow along with sample synthesis questions from College Board as models for building your school's collection of preparatory lessons and assignments appropriate for both pre-AP and AP students. The College Board questions will have, in all likelihood, a rhetorical emphasis rather than the literary emphasis of these examples. However, thinking about literary topics offers an opportunity for more challenging tasks than the more straightforward prose texts students will see on the exam. Practicing with more challenging questions will fortify students so that under the pressure of the actual examination, they will be more than adequately prepared. An accompanying synthesis essay assignment also follows.

Though texts for the synthesis question on the exam do not include poems, poetry analysis is a helpful preparation strategy for the Language exam. Poems require close and intelligent study of language choices and syntax. Without this kind of reading, the student will not grasp the essence of a poetic text at all. Thus, poetry forces students to practice the close, critical, thoughtful, and accurate reading required in the AP English environment. Accurate reading is especially important for the synthesis question since students will be drawing on the text passages for support. A misread passage, wrongly applied, can seriously undermine

the validity and persuasiveness of an argument. Further, close, careful reading leads to those thoughtful, imaginative insights that result in the most successful AP essays. Poetry will stretch and challenge your students' capacity for close, accurate, and insightful reading. Poetry analysis will help train students to focus quickly and accurately on the essential meanings embedded in the prose passages provided with the synthesis question.

The practices that follow also include images, a type of source that will appear in the synthesis question on the AP Language and Composition Examination. Students have an opportunity to develop their image reading skills through the guided lesson.

## PRE-AP SYNTHESIS PRACTICE

### GUIDED LESSON

#### Topic for Exploration

Most students are familiar with the idea that we project onto animals certain personality characteristics that actually belong to human beings. They may legitimately argue, as well, that particular species of animals actually have certain common qualities of personality. Dogs are generally viewed as being more dependent on their human masters than cats, who are viewed as more independent. In this short lesson, students examine three poems about cats and identify the personality traits of cats suggested by the poems.

1. In preparation for this class session, ask students to bring in examples of their favorite Garfield cartoons. Create a handout made up of a selection of these cartoons that best illustrate the character traits of Garfield.
2. Students may need help at first in decoding the following late eighteenth-century poem by Thomas Gray, but they will enjoy its humor and playful spirit.

#### Ode

##### ON THE DEATH OF A FAVORITE CAT DROWNED IN A TUB OF GOLDFISHES

'Twas on a lofty vase's side,  
Where China's gayest art had dyed  
    The azure flowers that blow;  
Demurest of the tabby kind,  
The pensive Selima, reclined,  
    Gazed on the lake below.

Her conscious tail her joy declared;  
The fair round face, the snowy beard,  
    The velvet of her paws,  
Her coat that with the tortoise vies,  
Her ears of jet, and emerald eyes,  
    She saw; and purred applause.

Still had she gazed; but 'midst the tide  
Two angel forms were seen to glide,  
    The genii of the stream:  
Their scaly armor's Tyrian hue  
Through richest purple to the view  
    Betrayed a golden gleam.

The hapless nymph with wonder saw:  
A whisker first and then a claw,  
    With many an ardent wish,  
What cat's averse to fish?

She stretched in vain to reach the prize.  
What female heart can gold despise?  
Presumptuous maid! with looks intent  
Again she stretched, again she bent,  
    Nor knew the gulf between.  
(Malignant Fate sat by and smiled)  
The slippery verge her feet beguiled,  
    She tumbled headlong in.

Eight times emerging from the flood  
She mewed to every watery god,  
    Some speedy aid to send.  
No dolphin came, no Nereid stirred;  
Nor cruel Tom, nor Susan heard;  
    A favorite has no friend!

From hence ye beauties, undeceived,  
Know one false step is ne'er retrieved  
    And be with caution bold.  
Not all that tempts your wandering eyes  
And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;  
    Nor all that glisters, gold.