



The Synthesis Essay



AP Language and Composition

Introduction

- Essay that argues your point of view on a given issue
- Along with the prompt, you are given six sources
 - One of the sources is an image
 - Photo, chart, graph, cartoon
- From three of the sources you are to draw facts, ideas, information—any relevant evidence you can use to bolster your argument
- Time frame—55 minutes
 - 15 minutes to read, take notes, write an outline, think about the issue, jot down a tentative thesis
 - 40 minutes to write the essay

The Prompt

- The prompt contain the topic for your essay
- Read it carefully
- Underline the words that tell you what you must do
- Sample prompt
 - Since the advent of cell phones, the Internet, e-mail and other wireless connections, we can stay in touch with the world 24/7 wherever we are, whatever we're doing. Does this ability to communicate make life more satisfying or does it lead to greater anxiety and stress?
 - After carefully reading the sources that follow, write an essay that synthesizes at least three of the sources for support and takes a position that defends, challenges, or modifies the assertion that portable electronic communication has improved our lives.

What is the prompt asking you to do?

■ First paragraph

- Introduces the assignment
 - Stirs up your thinking
 - Doesn't tell you how to proceed

■ Second Paragraph

- Spells out the instructions
 - Read the sources and write an essay
 - One that takes a position that either agrees or disagrees with the proposition that portable electronic communication has improved our lives
 - It also offers you the option of modifying or qualifying the statement

What It's About

- A synthesis essay is an argumentative essay
 - Must state a claim or statement of opinion
 - Thesis statement
 - Support the claim by presenting a variety of supporting evidence
 - Solid evidence—facts, observations, statistics, the opinions of experts, relevant anecdotes, etc.
 - Logically presented ideas
 - Convince readers that you understand the essay assignment and that you can apply both your own ideas and other ideas you've found in the sources to build a persuasive argument

Reading the Sources

- Read to understand what the source has to say
 - Quickly underline or circle supporting ideas, topic sentences, and other key words and phrases
- Read to analyze the author's position on the issue
 - Where the author presents evidence in favor of the claim, put a check in the margin.
 - Where the evidence opposes, write an X.

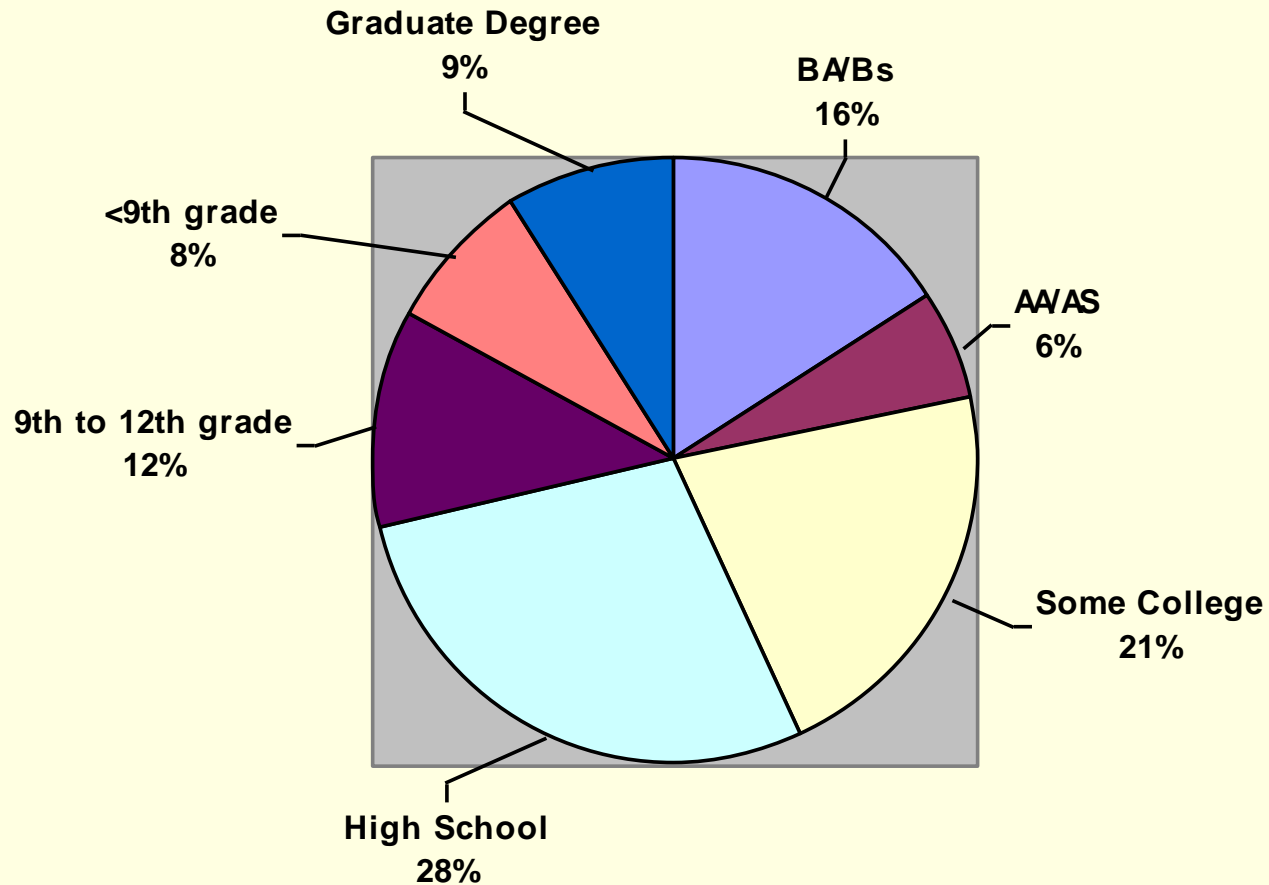
Reading the Sources

- Read for evidence and data that help define your position on the issue
 - The position you choose should be the one about which you have the most compelling things to say
- Interpret the visual source
 - Ask yourself what relevant information it contributes to the discussion of the issue

Visual Source

- Sometimes the visual source conveys a large amount of information
- Use the source to help you prove your point

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Assessing the Validity of Sources

- When it was published
- Where it came from
 - Be leery of a blogger's Web site, a supermarket tabloid
 - Best from scholarly journals, government documents, books by reputable authors, popular mass magazines
- Who its readers were likely to be
- What its purpose was
 - Knowing why an author decided to write a particular passage helps you figure out how trustworthy it is
- How objectively it was written
 - Is it reliable, rational, and does it support the idea with sound evidence

Which of the following reports of fire is a more reliable source of information?

- At 3:30 p.m. on Sept. 21, the Bedford Fire Department received a call that a residence at 330 Holly Road was on fire. Ten minutes later, the first fire truck arrived at the site and found a inferno on an unfinished porch. Fireman promptly extinguished the fire. Damage was limited to the wood frame of the unfinished structure. The cause of the fire is yet to be determined.
- Charlotte Robbins, a 36-year-old widow and mother of four young children wept profusely as she surveyed the charred ruins of the unfinished porch outside her Bedford home last weekend. “Poor Fred, he would have been devastated,” she sobbed, referring to her husband, a disabled mechanic, dead only three weeks, whose dream had long been to build a porch for his loving family. “Why, oh why did this happen to me?” Charlotte asked, but no one could answer. The cause of the fire remains a mystery, but the misery and heartbreak it caused for Fred’s survivors is readily apparent.

How to Write a Synthesis Essay

- Mini research paper
 - Devise a thesis and bring in evidence to support it
 - Must use at least three sources
 - Use your own knowledge, observations, and experience to support your point of view
 - Do not rely solely on the sources (your own ideas add a layer of depth)

Introducing your position

- Fuzzy, overly complicated position statements weaken an argument
- Make your position crystal clear with precise, unambiguous language
- Let's assume that a synthesis essay topic deals with the effects of gambling.
 - The issue is whether positive aspects of gambling outweigh its harmful effects, or whether the reverse is true—gambling causes more harm than good.

Which thesis is better?

- Gambling is an activity that affects the lives of millions of Americans.
- The economic effects of gambling are generally positive.

Use of Qualifying Words

- Notice the word *generally* in the position statement, “The economic effects of gambling are generally positive.”
 - Generally is a qualifying term that makes the statement less dogmatic. Without the word, the statement implies that gambling always has a positive effect on the economy, a claim that is hard to defend and nearly impossible to prove. Just a single exception would destroy its credibility. When you write a position statement, therefore, consider making the claim more difficult to challenge by including an appropriate qualifier.
 - As almost, frequently, generally, in most cases, likely, often, customarily, etc.

Where to put your position statement

- The first sentence
- Part of the first sentence
- Or first create a context for the thesis
 - Before stating your thesis, search through the sources for interesting ideas that you can adapt for an opening that will draw readers into your essay

Types of Introductions

- Begin with a brief incident or anecdote related to the point you plan to make in your essay.
 - Until Harrah's introduced casino gambling, Joliet, an Illinois steel town 40 miles from Chicago, was a depressed place, with high unemployment, low wages, and slum conditions. With the coming of the casino, the city enjoyed a remarkable economic rebirth. Jobs were created, opportunities for businesses multiplied, and the place became a magnet for investment in new housing, businesses, restaurants, and motels. While gambling is known to harm millions of Americans, the revitalization of Joliet demonstrates that its overall effect on a community can nevertheless be positive.

Types of Introductions

- State a provocative idea in an ordinary way or an ordinary idea worded in a provocative way.
 - Gambling casinos pay higher wages to their employees than almost any other business except salmon fisheries in Alaska. In spite of its potential for positive economic effects, however, the gambling industry harms American society more than it helps.

Types of Introductions

- Knock down a commonly held assumption, or define a word in a startling new way.
 - Last February, when Sophie Whittaker, a waitress in St. Louis, Missouri, eagerly boarded a Mississippi River boat for an evening of playing slot machines, she had no idea that winning really meant losing. She won five hundred dollars that night and came back the next weekend to win some more. But the gambling gods had other ideas. Sophie lost, and lost big. To make up for losing nearly a thousand dollars, she returned a few nights later. Two days later she went back once more, and then again and again, sometimes calling in sick to her boss in order to spend the evening hoping for a jackpot. She won a few dollars now and then but slid ever deeper into debt, pulled down by her new-found addiction. Sophie's experience is not unique. Hers is but one of the countless similar stories about Americans who have surrendered to the gambling habit, an unquestionable plague on American society.

Types of Introductions

- Ask an interesting question or two that you'll answer in the essay.
 - Why have Native Americans fought so hard in Washington for the right to run casinos on their tribal lands? The answer is simple. Casinos make their owners rich. In addition, gambling profits can pay the bills for schools, hospitals, roads, and other needs. In effect, in the right circumstances gambling does more good than harm.

Supporting your position with appropriate evidence

- Each paragraph in your essay should contribute to the development of the main idea.
 - Each should contain facts, data, examples, reasons of all kind to corroborate the thesis and to convince readers to agree with you

How much evidence to include

- Three distinct and relevant reasons should suffice
 - Don't be repetitive

Synthesis Thesis Statement

- A thesis for a synthesis essay has multiple parts:
 - 1. It identifies the common theme or rhetorical strategy
 - 2. It identifies how the authors are using that theme or rhetorical strategy
 - 3. Beyond stating the similarities and/or differences, it asserts what larger idea can be arrived at by looking at both texts. It's not enough to say "Both author A and Author B discuss _____." Why is that important?

Refuting Opposing Viewpoints

- Counterargument or refutation
 - A paragraph or more that points out weaknesses in the evidence that may be used by someone who disagrees with your position
 - You must anticipate the arguments that a prospective opponent might use to support a claim contrary to yours
 - Not essential but a counterargument is recommended
 - Adds punch to your argument

Avoid Faulty Reasoning

- New topic—the issue of tracking, or ability grouping, a longtime controversy in high school education. Some educators argue that students make greater educational gain when they are grouped according to ability. Others claim that ability grouping does more harm than good.
 - Topic sentence: Intelligent and capable students are often bored in mixed classes.

Which is the most logical?

- The quality of education improves when students are homogeneously grouped.
- Bright students in mixed classes are often left waiting for slow students to catch up.
- Pity the poor teachers tearing their hair out while trying to teach those godawful mixed classes.
- No one with his head on straight supports mixed classes.
- Homogeneous classes usually offer more stimulation.

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- The quality of education improves when students are homogeneously grouped. (too broad)
 - Bright students in mixed classes are often left waiting for slow students to catch up. (relevant detail)
 - Pity the poor teachers tearing their hair out while trying to teach those godawful mixed classes. (an emotional outburst)
 - No one with his head on straight supports mixed classes. (inappropriate and rude)
 - Homogeneous classes usually offer more stimulation. (logical)

Irrelevant Testimony

- New York Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter says, “I hated mixed classes in high school.”
 - Is it logical to cite the classroom experience of a professional baseball player (or any celebrity) in a serious educational argument?

Snob Appeal

- The best AP English students everywhere agree that ability grouping is the way to go.
 - There is nothing logical about this statement. It is a crude appeal to readers who think they are or wish to be members of an elite group. It adds nothing to a discussion of the pros or cons of ability grouping.

Circular Reasoning

- I favor ability grouping because it separates students with different skills and interests.
 - The writer has tried to justify a bias toward ability grouping simply by defining the term.
 - Why does the writer prefer ability grouping?

Absence of Proof

- Grouping has been studied time and again, but I have never seen proof that mixed grouping is educationally superior to ability grouping.
 - The writer admitted to the lack of knowledge.

Oversimplification

- When you get right down to it, ability grouping is like life; people prefer to be with others like themselves.
 - It is neither logical nor helpful to reduce a controversial and complex issue to a simple platitude.

Telling Only Half the Story

- Ability grouping is better because it serves the educational needs of both the smartest and the slowest students.
 - What happens to the students in the middle?

Going to Extremes

- If ability grouping were abolished, the system of American education as we know it would no longer exist.
 - Desperate?

Incorporating Sources

- The simplest and most obvious way to use a source in your essay is to state your position and back it up with an idea pulled out of the source.
- Suppose that you are writing about the positive or negative effects of advertising on our lives, and you wish to make the point that it's virtually impossible to escape from the influence of ads.

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- George Ehrenhaft, (Source A) discusses the growth of advertising in mid-20th century America.
 - The most important, and most multidimensional, of the forces shaping youth culture was mass communications... Signs, billboards, store displays, supermarkets, the traditional media, and finally, the new, all consuming, substitute environment, television, enveloped us in a cocoon of sensory information. I think it is doubtful that anyone who did not grow up in this postwar period can appreciate how much the senses of the young were bombarded, as they are today, by messages. Indeed, the media—in the broadest sense of the word—provided a new environment. To those who grew up in the new urban complexes, it virtually was the environment.

Direct Quotes

- Word-for-word reproductions of material found in a source.
 - Even though most people are unaware of how completely surrounded they have become by advertising, it has an unbelievably profound influence on the environment. In fact, according to George Ehrenhaft, “To those who grew up in the new urban complexes, it virtually was the environment.” (Source A).
 - Use ellipses (...) when you omit words from the original for grammatical or other reasons.
 - Enclose added words in brackets for clarity or other reasons.
 - To those who grew up in the new urban complexes, it [advertising] virtually was the environment.

Indirect Quotes

- Reports an idea without quoting it word-for-word
- No quotation marks are needed
 - Even though most people are unaware of how completely surrounded they have become by advertising, it has an unbelievably profound influence on the environment. In fact, George Ehrenhaft claims that it virtually was the environment to those who grew up in urban areas during the postwar period (Source A).

A Word of Caution

- Use direct and indirect quotes sparingly, and only as illustrative material
- Use them to support ideas that have first stated in your own words
- Although you may be tempted to use lots of quoted material to make your case, don't do it.
- Don't let quotes dominate your essay
- The AP exam is a test of your writing ability, not of your ability to quote others.

Too Many Quotes

- Even though most people are unaware of how completely surrounded they have become by advertising, it has an unbelievably profound influence on the environment. “Signs, billboards, store displays, supermarkets, the traditional media, and finally, the new, all consuming, substitute environment, television, enveloped us in a cocoon of sensory information...” It is clear that “anyone who did not grow up in this postwar period can appreciate how much the senses of the young were bombarded, as they are today, by messages. Indeed, the media—in the broadest sense of the word—provided a new environment.”

Paraphrasing

- Restating someone else's idea in your own words
- Contains the same information and should be roughly the same length as the original.
 - Even though most people are unaware of how completely surrounded they have become by advertising, it has an unbelievably profound influence on the environment. In fact, George Ehrenhaft states that advertisements actually became the environment in which young people in cities grew up after the war (Source A).

Commentary

- The sources provided on the exam are meant to:
 - give you information and to stimulate your thinking about the issue.
 - Give you ideas to discuss in your essay
- But...
 - To write a more distinctive essay, one that reveals your ability to interpret and analyze source material, try not only to draw from the sources but also to comment on them.
 - Respond by commenting on their ideas, their reasoning, their points of view
 - George Ehrenhaft offers a short-sighted view of...(Source B)
 - To a point George Ehrenhaft's idea flows ,Source B, although he does not carry the argument far enough. To strengthen his case he should have included....
 - Clearly, the George Ehrenhaft of Source B has a bias against...a failing that weakens his argument.

Citing Sources

- You must cite the source of all direct and indirect quotations
- You must give credit to any source from which you borrow, paraphrase, or adapt ideas
 - A brief parenthetical reference within the text of your essay
 - According to John Doe, a school psychologist, “Some children may be better off if they escape their parents’ grip, healthier if they grow up wild and free and sort things out on their own” (Source A).
 - Note the end punctuation comes after the close of the parenthesis and outside the quotation marks.
 - Integrate the information more fully into the text
 - Dean Marcy Denby argues that “the basic purpose of a university education has always been...”
- Not citing is plagiarism—a brilliant essay that might otherwise earn an 8 or 9 may receive a 1 or 2 if you fail to document your sources.