CHECKLIST FOR SYNTHESIS ESSAYS

Prewriting

- ☐ Make a list of what your arguments or factors will be. Make it longer than you'll actually use so you can choose the best things to put in your essay.
- ☐ Remember when making your list that it's generally good to (1) refute at least one source and (2), when applicable, make a concession to the same or a different source.
- ☐ Choose from the sources the best quotes or lines to paraphrase to help you make your argument.

Introduction

- ☐ First sentence contains an idea broader than the specific topic of the thesis, one which you will return to in conclusion for a circular closure. But avoid grand statements like "Since the dawn of man…" or cliché and wordy phrases like "in today's society."
- ☐ Introductory paragraph is short (2-4 sentences).
- ☐ Thesis specifically addresses prompt. If the prompt is asking you to take a stand on an issue, you take a clear stance, even if it is a qualified one. If the prompt is asking you to say what the important factors are in making a decision, then you are listing the major factors (as unformulaically as you can manage).

Body Paragraphs

- ☐ The first sentence of each body paragraph should begin with *you* making an assertion related to your thesis.
- ☐ No body paragraphs should begin with a source, whether quoted, paraphrased, or summarized. Sources are evidence. Body paragraph should always begin with an assertion that *you* are making.
- ☐ Every piece of evidence requires commentary, and this commentary should explain/enrich/develop the argument, not simply restate the evidence.
- ☐ Try to have multiple sources "conversing with each other" in every body paragraph For example: "While Source A points out _____, Source C show the inherent flaw in this argument, saying, ' _____.'" (This is using one source to *disprove* another.) Or after using and commenting on Source B, you might say something like "The point that Source B makes is only further proven by the data given in Source E" (using one source to support another).
- ☐ No body paragraphs should end with a source. Sources are evidence. Body paragraphs should end with multiple sentences of commentary.
- ☐ If appropriate given the topic, have a whole body paragraph that comes from you knowledge or experience with no sources used. This helps the paper seem like *your* argument, rather than just a report on sources.
- ☐ The commentary should be your voice. You are in control of and using the sources, not the other way around.

Conclusion

- ☐ Avoid cliché phrases like "in conclusion."
- ☐ The first sentence of the conclusion should probably be about the specific topic you've been writing about, but it should not summarize.
- ☐ The rest of the conclusion should move back to the broader topic you started with without restating what you said in the beginning.
- ☐ Conclusion should be 3-4 sentences maximum.

Preparing for the Synthesis Question: Six Moves Toward Success

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So you *might* want to listen to him!

The Art of Argumentation

When I taught high school in my home state, West Virginia, I encountered a situation that teachers all over the world must deal with when they teach students how to incorporate sources in their writing. After several initial classes on searching for information (these were the pre-Internet days, so we headed directly to the library), narrowing the topic, and crafting a preliminary thesis, my students would return to the library and then come back to me with a familiar refrain: "I can't find anything that supports my thesis!" I didn't blame the students, of course—they were just learning what it means to enter into the discourse of academic argumentation. As novices in this endeavor, they needed to learn that accomplished academic writers don't

simply draw material from published sources as if the sources were maples being tapped for their sap. On the contrary, savvy writers **converse** with sources and **incorporate** (literally: em-body) them in their argument.

As AP English Language and Composition courses prepare students to encounter the synthesis question on the free-response section of the exam, beginning with the 2007 administration, teachers will have the opportunity to teach these "moves" of academic writing in a way that will help students as they progress from high school to college. 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'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 is a task that the college-bound student should willingly take up.