

Free Response Essay #1: Synthesis Argument

Suggested time: 15 minutes (reading) + 40 minutes (writing)

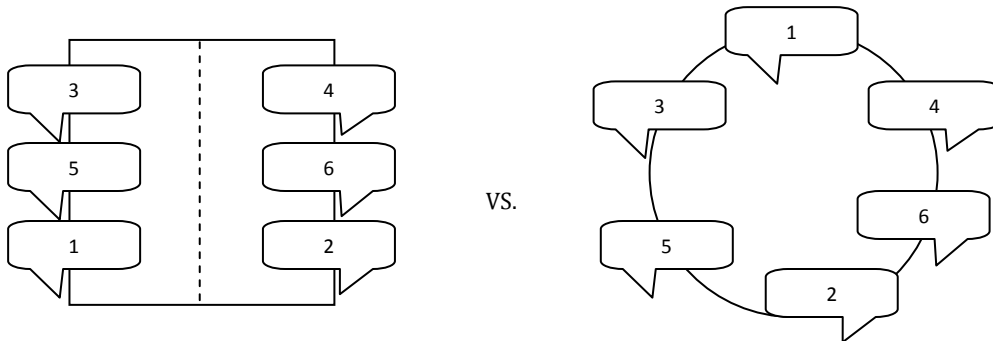
A different kind of general argument

At its core, this is another general argument. It covers the same kinds of topics and calls for the same **essential skills** and **outlining** that the third free response does. The major differences are in **Detail** and **additional skills**. You are also required to use at least three of the provided sources (and are encouraged to use one or two more) in your defense.

Additional skills

There are three major areas on which to focus here:

- ⊕ **Entering a conversation**
You are given a topic and asked to formulate your own argument based on the sources in front of you. This is a conversation, then, and you are entering it as an informed participant. Your position and its defense are paramount; that defense *must* respond to and incorporate the sources, however.
- ⊕ **Rhetorical analysis in miniature**
To use those sources, you must evaluate them. Identifying who is logically sound and who is fallacious is a start; being able to use another author's rhetoric as part of your own is even better.
- ⊕ **Using the sources**
Cite them, either by the author's last name or the source letter (e.g., Source A), and focus on a balance between paraphrasing ideas and quoting significant sections directly.

The shape of the conversation

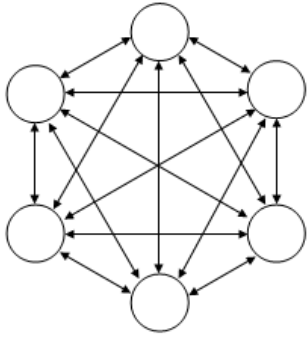
On the left, there are two sides to the conversation. Sources are lined up against each other, and you are asked to pick one of those sides and help defend it. On the right, there are more than two sides to the issue. Some sources contradict each other, while others disagree only slightly; some argue one aspect of the issue, while others discuss more expository elements. The right represents the synthesis argument. You are entering a conversation where seeing the way that the sources are arranged is as important as determining where *your* perspective fits in. The left represents the kind of document-based question often given as part of history exams.

Practicing the synthesis

The types of sources used on the synthesis question vary greatly. Almost all include a visual text, but the source could be anything from an editorial cartoon to an advertisement. Some texts are informal transcriptions of interviews; others are formal, scientific articles. The perspectives on the central issue can vary even more. The best way to practice, in the end, is to sift through sample prompts. Use the following approach:

- ⊕ Read every text, briefly annotating key points and main positions
- ⊕ Eliminate one or two texts that you *cannot* use
- ⊕ Arrange the other texts according to how they speak to each other
- ⊕ Incorporate the sources into the same outlining and writing that you will use on the general argument

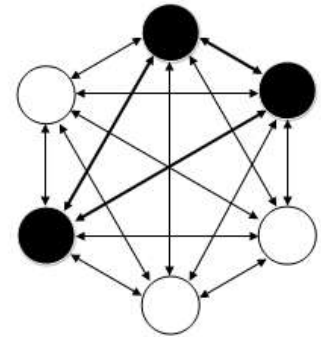
The following graphical organizers may help you to focus during the fifteen-minute planning portion of the synthesis free response. They are intended to offer another visual arrangement of the sources; remember, however, that you may have more than six sources, and that *effectively* using more than three sources can only boost your overall argument.



First, look for the connections between the sources as you skim over them. In a very real sense, the fifteen minutes you spend reading are an exercise in multitasking: You must develop your own position at the same time that you evaluate and accept or reject each of the sources with which you are presented. These sources should form a complex web of assertions and perspectives around the issue at hand. Keep that in mind, but also remember that you are being tested on your ability to bend those voices and their information to *your* argument, and that simply summarizing them will hurt your effectiveness.

One possible approach is to jump through the first hoop as quickly as possible: Identify three sources that relate to your developing position, isolate them, and annotate them. Then identify how those sources speak to each other. They might contradict one another; they might offer anecdotes or statistics that support a common assertion; or they might

raise questions that you can answer with your own logic, experience, and understanding. Keep in mind that it is always easier to deal with three texts than six, and that this is a test with its own explicit rules. *At least* three of these sources belong together.



Finally, no matter how many sources you intend to incorporate into your own argument, you must be careful that you have not selectively ignored another source that *should* have been incorporated, as well. In any kind of argumentative writing, the absence of an obvious counterargument reveals a failure of insight and logic; however, if that counterargument is part of a source that has been given to you, the absence reveals a failure in close reading and recognition, too. Remember that this is a test of many skills, one of which is your ability to quickly and accurately evaluate and organize disparate texts.

