

Free-Response Essay #1: Synthesis Argument

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

PATTERNS IN TOPIC SELECTION

This is a prompt that tests your ability to craft a rhetorically effective argument quickly and with maturity while blending several sources into your support. The prompts are nuanced and often focus on specific events; the topics, however, usually fall under a sort of timeless heading: **conflict, competition, technology, media, identity, suffering, economics, perspective, truth, tolerance, community**. While incomplete, that list ought to suggest the breadth of this particular free response.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Like every free response on this exam, your response must meet the following standards:

- ⊕ **CLARITY:** Is the writing clear? Are there lapses in readability or intelligibility?
- ⊕ **COHERENCE:** Do the ideas in the writing connect in a consistent, systematic, and logical way?
- ⊕ **COGENCY:** Is the argument or crux of the writing convincing, reasonable, and thorough?
- ⊕ **CONTROL:** Does the prose demonstrate control of grammar and stylistic strategies?

OUTLINING

You should use a few moments to outline your thoughts before writing. Here are three possibilities:

- ⊕ **DAMAGES**
See below.
- ⊕ **Traditional (5 ¶s w/multi-part thesis)**
An introduction that moves into a thesis statement with two or three distinct claims, followed by two to three paragraphs of defense of each claim, ending in a stylistic conclusion.
- ⊕ **Classical/Cicero**
See the excerpted appendices from *Thank You for Arguing* to review the classical model of argumentation. Pay special attention to the idea of concession, which we can call the art of refuting the counterargument. The presence of an insightful concession or counterargument is one way that more nuanced and effective writing separates itself from the merely adequate.

OUTLINING: DAMAGES

1. Begin with **Meaning** first. Break down the prompt and take a position on the issue or idea at the crux of the question. Attempt to write a thesis statement to drive your entire argument.
2. **Details** will help prove the central argument of your response. Create a quick list of support for your thesis, focusing on the sources. Which details are most persuasive? Which ones are most relevant to your response, and which ones can you cross off? Quickly decide if, how, and where you will use the **three Aristotelian appeals**, too. See the section on additional skills below for more help.
3. Third, consider the **Arrangement** of the paper. How will you move between claims and support? What analysis and insight will drive each paragraph? What is the relationship between those paragraphs, and what kind of transitional language suits that relationship?
4. Next, determine what your **Approach** will be. There are as many ways to begin as there are arguments, so it is often a matter of inventiveness. Here are a few options (from IWU):
 - a. **Inquisitive:** Shows that the subject is interesting, important, or odd.
 - b. **Paradoxical:** Sets up an expectation on the reader's part, then contradicts it.
 - c. **Corrective:** Shows that the topic has been neglected or ignored.

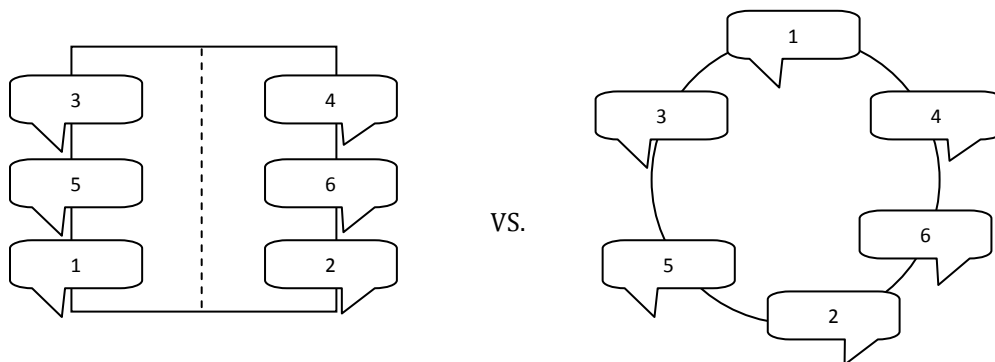
- d. **Preparatory:** The writer "prepares" the reader for the discourse by talking about it or apologizing or qualifying the following text.
 - e. **Narrative:** One of the most effective intros, this gambit tells an anecdote or story to snag the reader's interest and identify the subject.
5. Consider your **Ending** next. Like the **Approach**, you have many options, but you can memorize a few of the more useful stock possibilities (adapted in parts from IWU):
- a. Leave the audience with a favorable impression of the writer's credentials and intentions
 - b. Stress the important claims made and weaken contradicting claims
 - c. Return to the opening narrative to "frame" the response
 - d. Recapitulate or summarize the most important points
6. As you begin writing, concentrate on incorporating enough **Style** to set you apart from other writers. Focus on diction and syntax first, using the right language for your purpose and any audience the prompt provides; second, attempt to include rhetorically effective techniques and devices—whichever ones suit the moment and with which you are most comfortable.
7. Finally, be aware of your **Grammar**. Avoid careless mistakes and proofread each section of your paper by re-reading it.

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.

ENTERING A 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 own perspective fits in. (The left represents the kind of document-based question often given as part of history exams.)

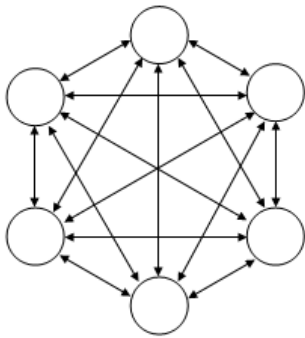
RHETORICAL ANALYSIS IN MINIATURE

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. Use the following approach to determine which sources fit your argument:

- ⊕ 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 an argumentative outline

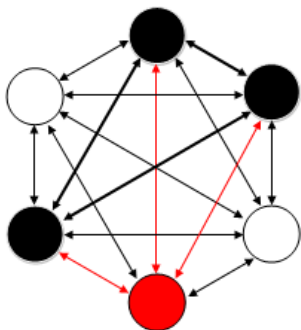
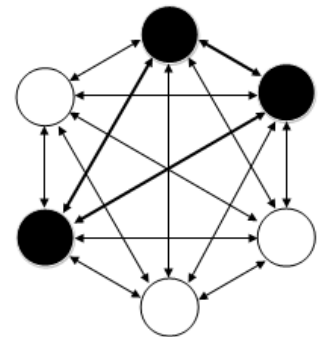
The following graphical organizers may help you to focus during the fifteen-minute planning portion of the synthesis free response. They are intended to offer another visual arrangement of the sources; remember, however, that you may have more than six sources, and that using more than three (effectively)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

USING THE SOURCES



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 evaluate and organize disparate texts quickly and accurately.