

## **The Synthesis Essay: An Innovation on the AP English Language and Composition Examination**

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Beginning in 2007, the AP English Language and Composition Examination will include a new kind of free-response (that is, essay) question, one that faithfully represents the way expository and argumentative writing are being taught in college composition courses.

The new question will call for a *synthesis essay*. Students will be given an array of brief sources, one or more of which may include graphic or visual data, and be asked to write a composition that develops an expository point or argumentative claim. As they do so, students will be required to synthesize information or perspectives from a specified number of these sources in their own writing.

An additional 15 minutes of reading time will be added to the examination, but that is the only proposed change of timing. Students will still have an hour to complete the multiple-choice questions and two hours to respond to the three essay prompts. One of these, of course, will call for the synthesis essay. The other two will require analytic and argumentative writing, just as the free-response prompts on the examination currently do.

This important change to the examination was recommended to the AP English Development Committee by a wide range of college composition instructors, including members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, an organization of college and university professors who either direct or are interested in the administration of first-year English, composition, and writing programs. Since the AP English Language and Composition Examination is designed to demonstrate exit-level proficiency from mainstream, first-year college writing courses, it is vital that the Development Committee pay careful attention to recommendations about the scope of the exam from college instructors and administrators.

The new question reflects four important principles operating in the teaching of college composition today. First, since the writing college students must do in courses throughout the curriculum is predominantly about the texts they read, a college writing course must prepare students to read and write about a wide range of genres carefully and critically, determining what is important and significant for their purposes in each text. In other words, college students must read and write about texts constructively, not simply reproducing information and ideas in their own compositions, but instead analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and synthesizing material from the original texts in their own work.

Second, while some writing situations call upon students to generate a central idea and support with evidence from their own reasoning, observation, and experience, a great many situations call upon students to enter into conversation with scholarship on an issue and to develop a

position that contributes to this conversation. Personal observations and experiences can still play a role in some college writing assignments, but as students proceed through college, their ability to offer thoughtful, reasoned comments about other people's ideas, represented in published texts, will come into play. Kenneth Burke's famous "parlor" metaphor from *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (University of California Press, 1941) vividly depicts this ability in action:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (pp. 110-111)

Succeeding as a college writer means, at least in part, being able to enter into and contribute effectively to such discussions.

Third, the texts that students encounter throughout the curriculum are not solely verbal. College students need to be visually literate—to be able to read, carefully and critically, graphs, charts, photographs, cartoons, and so on. As with written texts, students must be able to do more than simply reproduce the information and perspectives they encounter in graphic and visual texts. They must be able to analyze, interpret, evaluate, and synthesize this material in their own writing.

Fourth, while traditional instruction in composition and many standardized testing schemes have drawn distinctions between expository and argumentative writing, in college writing courses and assignments the dividing line between these two modes of writing is in fact relatively fine. Whether a writer is, for example, explaining an idea, offering an extended definition, comparing and contrasting two entities, or arguing a point, he or she is always taking a position and developing it with evidence, illustrations, details, and reasons.