Synthesis as Curriculum Design

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The development of the new synthesis question type for the AP English Language & Composition Exam presents instructors with the difficult task of trying to incorporate instruction in "synthesis" into an already busy course schedule. At first glance, instructors may think of synthesis as a new unit that must be added somewhere in the course and that must culminate in a major assignment such as a research essay. But the skills required of students to succeed on the exam's synthesis question are not that much different from what most instructors are probably already teaching. So rather than seeing synthesis as a set of concepts and skills that must be added on to the content of the course, instructors could see synthesis as a natural extension of other skills measured by the exam, such as argumentation and analysis.

Synthesis is the process of bringing together information from various sources to form a new whole. The word comes from a Greek root that means "to put together." So whenever students draw evidence from various sources to support a point—whether it's their reading, observation, or experience—they are synthesizing. In the context of the AP English Language & Composition Exam, however, synthesis refers to engaging three or more sources, which could be written or visual texts, to develop a position on a particular topic. The exam also requires that students cite these sources accurately, a skill necessary whenever students are writing from sources.

Types of Synthesis

In their textbook A Sequence for Academic Writing, Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen distinguish between two types of synthesis: explanatory and argumentative. The explanatory synthesis aims to inform, to make sure that readers understand the parts of a topic. In writing the explanatory synthesis, writers bring together information from various sources to illustrate a subject (Behrens and Rosen 89). The explanatory synthesis manifests itself in encyclopedia articles, textbooks, informative brochures, museum guides, music performance notes, or reviews of research. In the popular media, an explanatory synthesis might result in a news analysis of a complex current issue or a documentary film. An argumentative synthesis, on the other hand, aims to persuade, to convince readers to adhere to a particular claim. In writing the argumentative synthesis, writers also bring together information from various sources, but in this type of synthesis some of the information is provided as evidence to support the claim, while other sources may be included to represent views that the writer rejects. According to Behrens and Rosen, the explanatory synthesis "emphasizes the sources themselves, not the writer's use of sources to persuade others" (128). They offer the following as an example of a thesis statement for an explanatory synthesis on the subject of computer-mediated communication (CMC):
While many praise CMC's potential to bridge barriers and promote meaningful dialogue, others caution that CMC is fraught with dangers (128).

This example shows that in the explanatory synthesis, the writer still develops a position, but it is a position regarding what the sources as a whole say about the topic, not a position about which side the readers should believe. Here is an example of a thesis for an argumentative synthesis on the same subject of computer-mediated communication:

CMC threatens to undermine human intimacy, connection, and ultimately community. (Behrens and Rosen 128).

This example shows that the writer is trying to persuade readers to adopt a particular belief about the harmful effects of computer-mediated communication. But this particular thesis would lead to a pretty one-sided argument. Here is a revision of that thesis that shows how opposing views can still be synthesized within an argument:

Although many praise the potential of CMC to bridge barriers and promote meaningful dialogue, in practice CMC threatens to undermine human intimacy, connection, and ultimately community.

This particular thesis would naturally lead to an essay in which the author explains the views some hold about the possible benefits of CMC but then challenges these views by demonstrating how the potential harms outweigh the benefits.

Some topics lend themselves more readily to either an explanatory or argumentative synthesis, but students could actually develop both types of essays from the same source materials. Drawing upon several different sources, students could write an explanatory synthesis informing readers of the various positions people hold on a subject or could write an argumentative synthesis persuading readers that some of these positions are more valid than others.

Of the two sample synthesis questions provided to teachers prior to the 2007 exam, one question would lead to an argumentative synthesis, and one would lead to more naturally to an explanatory synthesis.¹ The first sample asks students to consider the effect of television on presidential elections since the 1960s. The prompt for this question asks them specifically to "defend, challenge, or qualify the claim that television has had a positive impact on presidential elections." Students then need to engage at least three of the sources that follow this question to take a position on this subject. They could use some sources as evidence to support a claim, or they might use sources to illustrate views that they would challenge. In either case, they are synthesizing, because they are integrating other sources into their argument.

¹. These samples can both be downloaded from AP Central (http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/51474.html).
The second sample synthesis question asks students to consider the effect of introducing new species into an ecosystem and the potential problem of invasive species. Although students do need to develop a position on this topic, the task required is not the same as “defending, challenging, or qualifying” a position. In this case, they are stepping back and informing their readers of the various issues they would need to consider in introducing a new species. This task requires more of an explanatory synthesis.

It’s easy to see, however, that the tasks required by these two samples could easily be reversed. In writing about the effects of television on presidential elections, students could be asked to evaluate what issues the Federal Elections Commission would need to consider before developing a series of televised presidential debates. This task would call for more of an explanatory synthesis. And in writing about the potential effects of invasive species, students could be asked to defend, challenge, or qualify the position that the U.S. government should restrict the importation of species from other countries. This prompt would lead to an argumentative synthesis.

**Argument**

Although the synthesis question is new to the exam, the skills required for synthesis are closely related to argumentation and analysis, skills that are already well established in the AP English Language & Composition curriculum. One could, for example, see the argumentative synthesis as the traditional argument question with sources. On the traditional argument question, students might be asked to “develop a position” or “defend, challenge, or qualify” a position on a particular subject. In the argument question, students are typically asked to “use appropriate evidence” and are often encouraged to draw on their “reading, observation, or experience.” The synthesis question may ask students to do the same kind of argumentative task but as part of that task to engage at least three of the sources provided as part of the question. Students could use these sources in many different ways: to support a claim, to represent various views, or to present arguments that they then challenge.

One way, then, to integrate synthesis into the existing course is to add sources to argument questions. The traditional argument question type usually includes a prompt to introduce students to an issue. Sometimes the prompt includes a brief quotation to get students thinking about the complexity of the issue. But ultimately, students are required to provide their own evidence. Instructors can move students from argument to argumentative synthesis, however, by providing students with some sources to work with. In fact, students could practice writing to the same prompt, initially without the sources and then a second time with some sources. Such an approach would help students learn the nuances of incorporating source material into an essay. For example, Form B of the 2006 AP Released Exam includes a question that asks students to take a position on compulsory voting, encouraging them to draw upon their “reading, experience, or observations.”

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will continue to be such questions on the exam, it would be useful for students to write an argument in response to this question. But then teachers could provide students with several documents related to the same issue: statistics on voter turnout in the past several election cycles, a photograph of Iraqis voting in their national election in 2005, written arguments for and against compulsory voting, or a list from the CIA World Factbook of countries that have compulsory voting (https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/fields/2123.html). Teachers could then ask students to reflect on the differences between responding to the same prompt with and without evidence.

Analysis

Since students also need to evaluate sources provided in the synthesis question, analysis provides another way into the synthesis question. I tell my students that “to analyze” means “to identify and explain.” And I tell them that analysis is one of the most useful skills they will learn in college. In a geology class, they may be asked to identify the layers of the Earth's crust and explain how they relate to one another. In an anatomy class, they might identify the parts of the human body and explain how these parts work together. In a history class, students might need to identify and explain the causes of the United States war with Mexico. These are all examples of analysis. In my writing class, I ask them to identify and explain the causes of the United States war with Mexico. But in this class, I ask them to identify and explain means of persuasion or the parts of an argument. An evaluation is simply an analysis with the force of judgment. To evaluate a source, students identify features of that source and then make a judgment about its usefulness as evidence based on that analysis.

One could, for example, evaluate sources according to the criteria recommended by many libraries: authority, accuracy, objectivity, currency, and coverage.

**Authority:** Is there an author? What qualifications or expertise does the author have?

**Accuracy:** Is the information in the source reliable? Can it be verified or corroborated with other reputable sources?

**Objectivity:** Is the source free from bias? Does it present more than one side of a complex issue?

**Currency:** Is the source recent enough to account for changes or developments in the subject area? (Currency is more important in some areas than others. Books on neuroscience are out of date even before they're in print. But books on ancient history might be current for many years.)

**Coverage:** Does the source adequately cover the range of issues related to the topic?³

Teachers can prepare students well to demonstrate their skills in analysis, argumentation, and synthesis by teaching them many ways to evaluate sources, but for the purposes of the synthesis question itself, it may help for teachers to remind students that the sources provided are not meant to be misleading or unreliable. There are no “red herrings” or

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³ New Mexico State University provides an example of how these criteria can be used to evaluate online sources (http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/evalcrit.html).
illegitimate sources on the synthesis question, as there might be on the Document-Based Question (DBQ) for AP U.S. History. Every source on the synthesis question is meant to be useful, but some sources may be more useful than others for the particular position the student wants to develop. In teaching skills in evaluation for this particular question, teachers may want to encourage students to evaluate the usefulness of the source for their rhetorical purpose, reminding them that a source may be useful because it supports a position they want to take but it may also be useful because it represents a position they wish to challenge.

Comparison/Contrast

In many cases, analysis only involves one source, but there are examples from past exams of analysis questions that ask students to compare two sources. Since the synthesis question requires students to engage three sources, the comparison/contrast essay provides a step from analysis towards synthesis. Comparison/contrast is a sustained analysis of the similarities and differences between two texts. To avoid mere "side-by-side" description, students need to first identify those features or elements the two texts share. Then they need to select those features that are the most significant for their purpose. Finally, they need to examine each text in relation to these features and determine the extent to which these texts are similar or different. For example, Stephen Heller, a teacher at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill., recommended to me an activity where students compare the representations of African Americans in To Kill a Mockingbird and Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask." This assignment could very easily lead into a synthesis essay on the status of blacks during the Great Depression. (The Library of Congress provides photographs and historical documents on this subject at http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/depwwii/race/race.html.) Even though a synthesis question derived from a literary topic may not reflect the kind of subject matter that often appears as an argument or analysis question on the exam, it would still provide students with opportunities to practice the skills within an existing curriculum.

Summary, Paraphrase, and Quotation

Analysis also provides students with a way into synthesis because analysis, comparison/contrast, and synthesis all require students to engage with source material and develop skills in quotation, paraphrase, and summary. Analysis, like synthesis, also requires students to develop the difficult metalinguistic skills of orienting readers to a text and incorporating evidence from a text into a commentary on that text. (By "metalanguage" I mean language that refers to language as language.) For instance, if students are going to analyze Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream," they need to represent this absent text in such a way that readers can reconstruct in their minds the essential features of King's speech.

These skills should be familiar to students who have written analyses of literary works. In her article "Implicit and Explicit Documentation: Teaching Students to Write from Literature,"
Sylvia Sarrett describes how to use quotation, paraphrase, and summary to incorporate information from a literary source into an analysis of that source. (This article is found in the AP English Literature & Composition section of AP Central: http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/45740.html.) She provides the following example from a student analysis of Fleur Adcock’s poem, “The Man Who X-Rayed an Orange”:

As Adcock tells the tale of the man’s attempt at superhuman strength, the final judgment comes over the level of success of the act. The man starves himself and reaches a plane of power in which he sees through and suspends an orange. The audience recognizes the accomplishment (“For surely he lacked nothing, / Neither power nor insight nor imagination.” (29-30)), but to the Man “It was not enough” (20). Though her audience certainly expresses a deep respect for the man, Adcock shares the opinion of the man himself and builds to the ultimate disappointment of the attempt to be a god-like creator. The last line of the poem, “His only fruit from the Tree of Life” (35), describing the “light-filled” (34) orange, shows the closest level a man can get to God. The actual orange, the “golden globe” (33) itself, represents the man’s ultimately impossible attempt at reaching divinity.

In this example, the student is able to make general claims about the poem (“Adcock shares the opinion of the man himself and builds to the ultimate disappointment of the attempt to be a god-like creator”) and then incorporates information from the literary source to illustrate these claims. The writer also uses metalanguage to direct the readers to the parts of the poem where this evidence can be found (“The last line of the poem . . . shows the closest level a man can get to God.”).

The following example illustrates how a student might refer to a text while completing a rhetorical analysis. The text here is Ronald Reagan’s “A Time for Choosing,” a speech in support of the nomination of Barry Goldwater, delivered at the 1964 Republican National Convention:

To begin his speech, Ronald Reagan provides statistics to illustrate the government’s poor ability to manage its money. He points out the high tax rate at that time (around 33%) and states that no nation in history has survived a tax rate that high. To illustrate the carelessness of government, he then shows how government spends 17 million dollars more a day than it takes in. This example provides logical evidence to support his point and encourages a sense of outrage in his audience. Reagan then provides a second example to prove his point by focusing on the problems with programs set up to help farmers. He shows that farms that are part of various organized government plans have been less productive than other farms. For example, farms in the feed grain program spent 43 dollars for every one dollar bushel of corn. Reagan uses these examples to support Barry Goldwater’s idea of less government control.

A few paragraphs later he tells about the hungry and needy in America. Through welfare, these people should receive enough money to be well off and out of poverty. However, out of the 4,600 dollars a year they should be receiving, they only get 600. This is another instance where Reagan uses statistics along with emotions to affect his readers.
In this passage, the student uses several strategies to orient readers to Reagan's speech. The phrases “To begin his speech…” and “a few paragraphs later” give the reader a general sense of where these examples come in the speech. And the writer uses summary and paraphrase to present Reagan's evidence. And most importantly, what distinguishes this passage from mere summary is the writer's comments on the rhetorical strategies Reagan is using. The student writes, “This example provides logical evidence to support his point and encourage a sense of outrage” and “This is another instance where Reagan uses statistics along with emotions to affect his readers.” These comments show that the student is referring readers to the speech in order to explain how Reagan's rhetoric works.

The synthesis question on the exam requires similar techniques, but with three or more sources. A student might refer to a source as evidence to support an argument or as an example to illustrate a point. Or a student might refer to a source in order to illustrate the positions various people might take on an issue or to represent a position that the student would then challenge. In any case, the student needs to use the same kinds of skills in referring to a source using summary, paraphrase, and quotation. Here is an example of how these skills might be used in writing a response to the sample synthesis question on the effect of television on presidential elections:

Much has been made of the Kennedy–Nixon debates as an example of the power of the media in an election. In his article for The Encyclopedia of Television, Angus Campbell cites this as an example of television's “novel contribution to the political life of the nation” (Source A). In his discussion of these debates, Louis Menand believes, along with historian Theodore White and even Kennedy himself, that television gave Kennedy the election (Source B). Menand repeats the familiar example of how people who saw the debate on television thought Kennedy had won, but those who had heard it on the radio thought that Nixon had won (Source B).

However, despite the obvious impact of television on the 1960 election, the broadcasting of presidential debates has had less of an impact on elections since that time. As the table in Source C illustrates, during the difficult years of the Vietnam War, no one wanted to debate on television. And even when the televised debates resumed in 1976, the number of people watching debates steadily declined from a peak in 1980, even though the number of channels has expanded (Source C), as have the number of televisions and viewers. Perhaps there was something about the novelty of the first televised debates that made them more influential than they would be in our time when television has become more commonplace.

Conclusion

Without doubt, the introduction of the new synthesis question type will require teachers to reconsider how they teach their courses. One approach, of course, is to add a “research essay” unit (if there isn't one already) that focuses on how to find and evaluate sources and how to integrate them into an informative or argumentative research essay. This is certainly the curriculum model used in many first-year writing courses at universities throughout the country (including, until recently, my own). Because the synthesis question builds on skills of argument and analysis, a unit that focuses on synthesis would likely come later in
the school year, closer to the date of the actual exam. But by teaching “synthesis” as a set of discrete skills tied only to the research essay, teachers may be missing an opportunity to provide students with a more integrated view of writing. By introducing elements of synthesis into earlier units, such as units on argument or analysis, or by including synthesis in thematic units—even units that focus on literary works—teachers can help their students see that synthesis is a natural extension of skills students are already developing and not a discrete set of skills that must be added on top of what the course already requires.

Until recently, the first-year writing course at Brigham Young University had discrete units devoted to writing about personal experience, critical analysis, research writing, and argumentation, with little consideration of how the skills in these units might relate to one another. But recently, the first-year writing course has gone through a course redesign in which all of the assignments in the course are organized around a set of readings on one of four common topic areas: religion in America, globalization, the environment, and the mass media. (I taught a course organized around environmental issues related to water resources and water quality.) In addition to a rhetoric handbook, the course includes a topic-oriented reader from the Opposing Viewpoints series published by Greenhaven Press. Students write critical analyses of the sources in the reader, and some of these sources are then incorporated, along with sources from their own research, into an argumentative synthesis. Focusing on one topic area in this way requires students to explore issues in much greater depth and brings some unity to the skills taught in the course. Teachers of a high school AP course may not have as much freedom to devote an entire semester to one topic, and there is wisdom in exposing students to a lot of different subjects, but students may still benefit from readings that engage one another around common themes. By doing this, rather than being an additional burden to teachers and students, the skills required by the new synthesis question may actually provide students with a more integrated understanding of rhetoric and writing.

References


Developing a Synthesis Question

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In my mentoring work with new AP English Language & Composition teachers as well as in my department, I’ve found that many colleagues enjoy building their own AP free-response questions. Writing “homegrown” prompts invites AP teachers to consider (and when necessary reconsider) not only the essentials of the AP English Language & Composition course as set forth in the AP English Course Description and made real on past examinations, but also the shape, thrust, and content of their own courses. We also come together as a community to exercise vital curriculum development skills and share our efforts.

Some teachers consider the lineup of essays, speeches, or letters in their courses, then select and surround passages from particular texts with the apparatus of a task related to rhetorical analysis. Other teachers consider the range of argumentative tasks associated with corresponding introductory college courses and fashion argument questions of their own. Teachers are not, of course, left entirely to their own devices, since the wide range of released free-response questions serve as models.

With the advent of significant examination changes involving source-based writing and image-based texts, nearly all AP teachers can improve their course by creating synthesis essay assignments for their students. Of course, there is no bulging inventory of released AP free-response synthesis questions. And while we will soon begin seeing released synthesis tasks on AP Central, they will appear at the rate of two each year.

Thus, new or experienced AP teachers face the prospect of building their own synthesis questions. How to proceed? Initially, take stock and consider instructional context, recognizing that success on synthesis questions involves many of the same academic skills and habits of mind that students are already developing in AP English Language & Composition. After examination changes were announced, my AP and Pre-AP teaching colleagues and I sat down to conduct such a review of our curriculum.

We recognized that synthesis questions would require our students to consider texts in light of each other. We knew that they already analyzed several pairs of texts, comparing/contrasting rhetorical features and arguments: Eudora Welty’s nostalgic “The Little Store” was paired with E.B. White’s subtle “Once More to the Lake”; William Hazlitt’s enthusiastic account of a 19th-century boxing match was juxtaposed with Norman Mailer’s harrowing report from ringside of the fatal Benny Paret–Emile Griffith fight; Annie Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels” was set beside Henry David Thoreau’s “Why I Went to the Woods.” However, we also realized that synthesis activity required more complex moves than just generating
an account of the rhetorical differences between a pair of sources. We knew that synthesis questions asked our students to consider an array of 6-8 texts in light of each other, thus adding dimension and shape to their reading and writing activity. The synthesis conversation would involve the kind of calm, considerate regard that comes with listening to and thinking about many voices before making up and speaking one's own mind. Thus, beyond working with clusters of source texts associated with synthesis assignments, students would need to develop a patient approach, appreciating the multiple forms, viewpoints, and tactics presented in such source arrays, gathering perspective prior to arriving at their own positions and writing their own essays. Significantly, students would have to develop more contemplative habits, thoughtfully evaluating multiple sources and arguments before fashioning their own messages. We found we were already asking our students to go beyond writing researched reports by assigning source-based arguments around controversial issues. In teaching both rhetorical analysis and argument, we had previously developed study clusters involving teacher-selected texts that demanded close reading and evaluation of multiple sources associated with facets of a variety of subjects such as "beauty" and "war photography."

But while all these assignments require students to analyze and evaluate multiple texts before writing an informed essay of their own, they have extended time periods to address the assignments, not a mere 55 minutes as with the synthesis question on the AP exam. The on-demand reading and writing context is much more urgent; students need to develop "on-demand patience" as an academic habit. Questions offered in the classroom setting can, of course, vary available response time as students develop the skills associated with reading sources, engaging in discourse with each one, synthesizing several in support of their argument. We knew we would need to give students practice working with multiple texts over increasingly limited time periods, culminating in some 55-minute reading/writing sessions. As we gradually cut the available reading and writing time, we would have to limit the size and number of the sources.

Before writing my first synthesis question, I consulted with veteran AP teacher and former AP English Language & Composition Development Committee member Kathy Puhr, who suggested I look at the Hazelwood prompt from the 1990 examination. This prompt asks students to read six "items" carefully, "then write an essay presenting a logical argument for or against the Supreme Court decision" that settled a controversial question: "How much freedom...should (or must) student newspapers" have? Even though the Hazelwood task does not present students with multiple texts that would consume 15 minutes of reading time or offer an image-based text for consideration and analysis, it does ask students to consider multiple viewpoints on a controversial situation. Students have to patiently read and consider each of those viewpoints in light of each other before moving forward and writing their own essay in response to a prompt. Certainly, the Hazelwood prompt highlights key features seen in a unique free response-argument question that further suggests important elements of synthesis questions.

So what's involved in building a synthesis question?
Special Focus: Using Sources

Follow the AP Central Model.

Look at official models or released synthesis questions and identify the fundamentals of the form. Use wording that is consistent with, but not necessarily identical to, that found in these tasks. The task page will:

- Identify particular time constraints for student reading and writing;
- Offer general directions;
- Concoct an introduction to the subject, one that provides an appropriate context for the reading and thinking that precedes and accompanies writing;
- Present the assignment itself, the particular task that must be addressed through writing; and
- Refer to the sources, in presentation order.

The “Directions” portion of the task lays out instructions for reading and writing; it tells students what they have to do. Directions should convey to students the total number of sources that will inform their investigation into the question. They should remind students to read the various sources carefully, cite them accurately, and write their own essays purposefully. Finally, directions should emphasize that synthesis of sources involves making apt source references in service of their own essay’s argument. Mere source summary won’t do.

The introduction is the students’ friend... or is it?

The “Introduction” segment of the task page creates a context for thinking about the “Assignment,” allowing students to enter the ongoing discussion around a topic, issue, or problem. This important portion of the synthesis task helps your students approach the assignment by stimulating initial thoughts and providing a frame of reference. Whether the task is narrowly focused or more broad, the introduction should let students know something about what people are already talking and writing about. While this segment ought to be helpful, it can be dangerous; if too extensive or provocative it can distract students by posing questions or raising issues that command such heavy attention that they write in response to the introduction instead of the assignment.

Chicken or eggs: What comes first, the question or the sources?

While it appears orderly to first settle on a question, then look for worthy sources, that’s not necessarily what ought to happen. Writing a question and selecting sources is an organic activity. The question and the sources interact, and the entire task is subject to revision throughout the development process. As the whole task takes shape, the assignment and its introduction can evolve during the search for and work with the sources. Although the question appears on the task page and thus precedes the sources, it doesn’t necessarily come first in the making of a synthesis question. A good question can spring into being from one or two engaging sources just as a good question can spark a search for sources. When considering a subject area that might yield a viable question, the focus of the synthesis
cluster as suggested by sources and shaped by the particular task can evolve and often gain definition in the process.

**Determine the character of the assignment.**

The opening sentence of the “Assignment” portion of the task page almost always tells students to read the sources with care. The directions for writing follow. Will students be required to respond to a controversial issue by defending, qualifying, or disputing a particular claim associated with one side? Will they be asked to provide a definite viewpoint, a particular way of looking at an issue or other matter of importance? Will they need to evaluate sources from a particular perspective or with a particular audience in mind? Will they need to explain and identify relevant issues? It's also worthwhile to remember that a viable homegrown synthesis task can take advantage of regionally prominent issues or other more immediate concerns that are more controversial, topical, or narrowly focused than students are likely to encounter on the exam. For example, while the Educational Testing Service might consider a question about the ethics of stem cell research or the appropriateness of military activity as too hot for the general examination audience, such a question might offer a suitable instructional opportunity in an individual classroom.

**Selecting sources.**

Source collection is vital; expect to gather many more than you need. Sources need to be functional: varied, distinct, and certainly not redundant. Each selected source should represent a viable viewpoint on the question at hand and should not merely repeat the viewpoint of another source. There is no place for sources that distract. Since time is a factor for the student, sources need to be sufficiently succinct to allow for discourse to occur in the allotted time. Sources will differ in character while still affording quality opportunities for student engagement. When gathering possible sources, expect significant issues involving the character, balance, length, sequence, and chemistry of sources to arise. Teacher-selected sources ought to suggest the complex dimensions of most important matters and not simply present a lineup that conjures up “two sides” of an issue. Despite the polarization evident in popular media coverage, issues are rarely as simple as “it's either this or that” debates. Thus, the array of sources needs to be appropriately broad as well as balanced. Sources also should authentically challenge, perplex, and even surprise students. A good source may be sufficiently ambiguous to invite different interpretations. And different students will, of course, identify different portions of a source as important. While some sources may seem more accessible than others, each source should bring value to the array, and contribute unique, important elements to a virtual discussion involving the student and the other sources. Taken together, the sources you select will suggest a range and capture some tension around the issue at hand. Be prepared to discard sources that, while they may appeal to you, just do not fit or serve a function in the synthesis task.

In light of the foregoing, here are some comments on the construction and character of the finished synthesis essay task at the end of this article. The task is one I have administered
to my AP class during the first semester, following completion of the year's opening unit. The context of my students was foremost in my mind: As part of their movement from English courses that highlighted imaginative literature into one that features nonfiction, they had read two memoirs for summer reading (Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood* and Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*). Subsequently they wrote their own purposeful "mini-memoir" modeled upon Donald M. Murray's autobiographical commentary "The Stranger in the Photo is Me." The question had its roots in a paper a student in one of my non-AP classes had written that wondered why James Frey had been roasted for "making up" details in connection with *A Million Little Pieces* while Tim O'Brien was celebrated for deliberately blurring the line between "happening truth" and "story truth" in *The Things They Carried*.

At one time, I had collected 16 potential sources, more than double the number of sources that appear in the task here. I cut sources for lots of different reasons. For example, I fell in love with a quotation from *When Memory Speaks* by Jill Ker Conway, but it was a bit long, and it echoed ideas that were prominent in the Patricia Hampl excerpt. While I lined up two pertinent comments by Annie Dillard, my students were too familiar with her work; one Dillard source passage came from a text used in class and would have certainly and immediately drawn many students into response.

The image-based texts considered for this prompt were almost all cartoons, although I did examine a photograph of Oprah berating James Frey. I nixed the Oprah–Frey photo, as it tilted the question too much toward Oprahland: I simply did not want to read clever references to Tom Cruise's couch exploits. The cartoon by Bill Amend was actually selected from a series of four on the subject. While I pondered using three of the four, I felt that, given the time constraints, students would either get too caught up in reading each of the cartoons or treat the three texts (which featured slightly different arguments) as one and fail to do justice to the analysis of one text.

In looking for balance and chemistry, I knew that the prominence of the Frey case and the content of his quasi-*mea culpa* statement propelled his text into the mix, but not in the leadoff position. I led with comments from William Zinsser due to the breadth of his remarks concerning the larger category of nonfiction—he does not specifically address memoir in the source. Despite the importance of *The Smoking Gun*’s accusations, I was drawn to the weblog of Mark Roberts, an author who not only made his thinking on the Frey matter quite clear but also drew a powerful comparison. In addition, he raises a surprising issue: publisher ethics. Amend uses a child's activity to satirize the situation and get at the financial motivations; the cartoon source raises issues that are raised nowhere else in the array. Canada's Joseph Kertes offers a strong and particular defense of invention; in stark contrast, Patricia Hampl's final remarks imply that twisting or forgetting the truth is a dark act. Finally, Lee Gutkind shares some content knowledge with Kertes but uses that knowledge in connection with a different argument.
Developing a Synthesis Question

Finally, after settling upon the MLA format for the source entries I made final adjustments to the introductory information that precedes each source. In addition to including basic statements characterizing each source, I decided to provide students with some information concerning each author, thus generating additional context.

What’s the Truth About Memoir?

Synthesis Essay
Reading Time: 15 minutes
Writing Time: 40 minutes

Directions: The following prompt is based on the accompanying seven sources.

This question requires you to integrate a variety of sources into a coherent, well-written essay. Refer to the sources to support your position; avoid mere paraphrase or summary. Your argument should be central; the sources should support this argument.

Remember to attribute both direct and indirect citations.

Introduction: Memoir remains a popular genre and form of nonfiction. Some memoirists, however, have been accused of misrepresenting certain events of their lives to suit their goals, be they aesthetic or commercial. To what extent, if at all, should a memoirist, in Russell Baker’s words, be able to “invent the truth”? How absolute a label is “nonfiction”? What constitutes the standard for “truth” in a text that is presented to its potential audience as a memoir?

Assignment: Read the following sources (including any introductory information) carefully. Then, in an essay that synthesizes at least three of the sources for support, take a position that defends, challenges, or qualifies the claim that a memoirist’s commitment to the truth is of absolute importance in memoir writing.

Refer to the sources by their titles (Source A, Source B, etc.) or by the descriptions in the parentheses.

Source A (Zinsser)
Source B (Frey)
Source C (Roberts)
Source D (Amends)
Source E (Kertes)
Source F (Hampl)
Source G (Gutkind)
Source A


The following is an excerpt from a book that provides guidance to writers of memoir. Its author is a noted writer and teacher of writing.

When nonfiction is raised to an art, it's usually because the writer imposed on the facts an organizing shape or notion—an idea—that hadn't been attached to them before.

I think of Tom Wolfe’s book *The Right Stuff,* an account of the astronauts who pioneered America’s space program. Wolfe’s reporting throughout is solid; he hasn’t embellished the facts. The value he adds is to attribute the astronaut’s success to certain traits of character that he analyzes and defines as “the right stuff.” That raises the book to an art, lifts it above other books about the space program, and gives us an intellectual mechanism for pondering what it takes to be an explorer and to leave the known world behind—a mystery as old as the Phoenicians. Beyond all that, Wolfe’s postulation is enjoyable. It’s fun to tag along on his ride.

Source B


In January 2006, “The Smoking Gun” Web site documented what it called numerous instances of misrepresentation by James Frey in his bestselling memoir *A Million Little Pieces.* The following statement is an excerpt from an insert included with copies of James Frey’s book soon after widespread public comment developed over his alleged use of invented details in his memoir. His book offers a personal account of his rehabilitation from drug and alcohol abuse.

I believe, and I understand others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of from a strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection. This memoir is a combination of facts about my life and certain embellishments. It is a subjective truth, altered by the mind of a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. Ultimately, it’s a story, and one that I could not have written without having lived the life I lived.

I never expected the book to become as successful as it has, to sell anywhere close to the number of copies it has sold. The experience has been shocking for me, incredibly humbling, and at times terrifying. Throughout this process, I have met thousands of readers, and heard from many thousands more, who were deeply affected by the book, and whose lives were changed by it. I am deeply sorry to any readers who I have disappointed and I hope these revelations will not alter their faith in the book’s central message—that drug addiction and alcoholism can be overcome, and there is always a path to redemption if you fight to find one. Thirteen years after I left treatment, I’m still on the path, and I hope, ultimately, I’ll get there.
Source C


The following is excerpted from an online article at the author’s Web site. Rev. Dr. Mark D. Roberts is a pastor, author, speaker and blogger. Since 1991 he has been the senior pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church in Irvine, Calif. He has had several nonfiction books published by WaterBrook Press which, like A Million Little Pieces publisher Anchor Books, is an affiliate of Random House, a major publisher.

[My] experience as a non-fiction writer working with a Random House company was almost completely different from that of James Frey when it comes to the matter of truthfulness. His publisher was willing to accept his account at face value, even when he claimed to have experienced things that were truly incredible and seemed to beg for additional evidence. But there was no fact checking, no corroboration. Just blind trust.

When WaterBrook Press edited my first manuscript with them, it almost seemed to me as if I were guilty of falsehood until being proven innocent. For every single quotation in the book I was asked to submit, not only the precise bibliographical reference, but also a photocopy of the original or an Internet link. When I protested that I didn’t have some of this information, I was encouraged to go to the library and get it, which I did. WaterBrook, I was told, wanted to make sure that every jot and tittle was correct, without exception.

Why, I wonder, would one subsidiary of Random House have such a high commitment to truthfulness, while another does not? I’m tempted to say that this can be explained, in part, by the Christian values of the WaterBrook staff. They do not think that truth is merely a matter of personal perception. Rather, they tend to think in more objective terms.

Yet it’s not only Christian publishers that have high regard for the truth. Last year I was mentioned briefly in a New Yorker article on Hugh Hewitt, my friend and fellow blogger. I recall, I was included in one sentence of an article of several thousand words. Before that New Yorker story ran, I received a call from a magazine staff person. He was checking facts. He and I spent at least five minutes on the phone together. He asked about many things that never appeared in the article, concerning me and concerning Hugh. I mentioned that he was thorough. His answer was something like, “At the New Yorker we are committed to getting everything right.” I was impressed.

Source D


Foxtrot is a syndicated comic strip that appears in daily and Sunday newspapers in North America.

The following is excerpted from an essay. Joseph Kertes is an author and the dean of the School of Creative and Performing Arts at Humber College in Toronto. The Walrus is a monthly Canadian journal.

As its name implies, memoir depends for its accuracy on memory. Tobias Wolff, author of the grim memoir This Boy’s Life, writes, “Memory has its own story to tell. Memoirists are not writing proper history but rather what they remember of it, or, more accurately, what they can’t forget.”

So if James Frey did not tell an absolute truth but rather told his version of drug addiction and recovery, of hell and redemption, if he made up some details or embellished the facts, it was in the service of a higher truth about death and resurrection. It was his truth and therefore it was genuine. Otherwise, millions would not have believed him. After all, even after Frey was exposed, his book remained on the bestseller lists for months.

He may have been lying but he was not faking. There is a difference, and it is the salient difference. There is no trickery or fakery in the book, just the experience of a man who has endured much and lived to tell the tale—or his take on it. Before I picked up the book, I watched my daughter and wife—both discriminating readers—stay up late into the night to get through it. The book is compelling precisely because Frey knew what was required to fill out the narrative. Even the life of a drug addict must have slow bits, and Frey was smart enough to leave those bits out. Is that a form of deception?

If so, Frey is not the first memoirist to massage the facts to sculpt his narrative, and the company he keeps might surprise some purists. Henry David Thoreau, for instance, pretended in his great non-fiction work Walden that he slept under the stars and cherished the universe as it was created. He didn’t. He slept in a house in Concord, often at his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson’s place. But he needed Walden’s non-fiction narrator to masquerade as a woodsman. Being at one with nature allowed the narrator to transcend the self more successfully than being a sleeper in a plush bed in town.


The following is excerpted from a book. Patricia Hampl is Regents’ Professor of English at the University of Minnesota. I Could Tell You Stories is her exploration of the genre of memo
Memoir must be written because each of us must possess a created version of the past. Created: that is, real in the sense of the tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history. And the downside of any created thing as well: We must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity of our points of view. We must acquiesce to our experience and our gift to transform experience into meaning. You tell me your story, I’ll tell you mine.

If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us. That is the scary political fact. “The struggle of man against power,” Milan Kundera’s hero in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting says “is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” He refers to willful political forgetting, the habit of nations and those in power to deny the truth of memory in order to disarm moral and ethical power.

It is an efficient way of controlling masses of people. It doesn’t even require much bloodshed, as long as people are entirely willing to give over their personal memories. Whole Nazi histories can be rewritten. The books which now seek to deny the existence of the Nazi death camps now fill a room.

What is remembered is what becomes reality. If we “forget” Auschwitz, if we “forget” My Lai, what then do we remember! And what is the purpose of our remembering? If we think of memory naively, as a simple story, logged like a documentary in the archive of the mind, we miss its beauty but also its function.

Source G


The following is excerpted from the editor’s introduction to a collection of nonfiction pieces. Lee Gutkind is writing program professor at the University of Pittsburgh and a prominent promoter of “creative nonfiction,” as founder of the journal Creative Nonfiction.

The ethical boundaries of the narrative are not . . . a new dilemma or debate. Henry David Thoreau lived for two years on Walden Pond while documenting only one year. Which part of the two years did he choose, and how often, in his painstaking process of revision, did he combine the two or three days—or even four weeks—into one? This technique that Thoreau evidently employed, by the way, is called “compression”—meaning that multiple incidents or situations are combined or compressed in order to flesh out the narrative—allowing a writer to build a more compelling, fully executed three-dimensional story.

Student Samples

Sample A does the best job of highlighting her own argument. Her argumentation is particularly cogent. She raises her position with questions at the end of her first paragraph then punctuates her view at the end of her essay, after seasoning her argument with apt references to the sources.
Sample B is workmanlike but subtle. He uses the sources in order to find his way through the question toward his argument, which does not really emerge until the last two paragraphs of his response.

Sample C's author knows what she thinks, and musters support for her views throughout her response. Her essay lurches a bit, and her language choices are not always ideal, but she certainly conveys her thinking. Her strongest moments, however, come at the end with a clever illustration drawn from a film's message.

SAMPLE A

How much embellishment can a memoir contain and still represent the genre of memoir? At what point does a memoir become a work of fiction? Some writers argue that anything but the truth and the whole truth is a lie. But in all honesty, few readers could care about the author’s breakfast choices; dull recollections of insignificant past events are not much more enticing. Besides, it is the character of what one remembers of an event that directs him towards one path instead of another and alters who he becomes. Isn’t conveying the essence of the truth the purpose of most memoirs? Shouldn’t an author illustrate how he or she has arrived in a place and use those engaging illustrations to convey a message, advice, or warning?

Most writers agree that there is some point where a memoir with excessive exaggeration or embellishment becomes a fictional story, perhaps even one that could effectively convey the intended message. For example, in one panel of Bill Amend’s comic Fox tro t, a character in the process of “writing a ‘memoir” asks which story line would be most helpful in “raking in gazillions”: being “born in a dumpster, or raised by sewer rats?” when, obviously, neither optional memory is close to the truth. When large events and ideas such as this are entirely fabricated, the book crosses the line into the fiction category (Source D). The debate, however, is over how many and what sort of exaggerated or omitted details would constitute such a switch.

James Frey, author of the bestselling memoir A Million Little Pieces, was heavily criticized for his use of invented details. In a statement, he expresses the hope that “these revelations will not alter [the reader’s] faith in the book’s central message” (Source B). One could argue that some details need not be entirely accurate as long as the basic story line is based upon truth and any embellishments aid in conveying the memoir’s message, in this case encouraging the idea that “drug addiction and alcoholism can be overcome” (Frey). In addition, as Joseph Kertes comments about Frey, “even the life of a drug addict must have slow bits, and Frey was smart enough to leave those out” (Source E). What reader cares about every mundane detail of life? Such a memoir may turn off readers entirely out of sheer dullness, and no message, even an important one, can reach anyone if it is not published or read. Even Henry David Thoreau knew this; according to Lee Gutkind, professor at the University of Pittsburgh, in Walden, Thoreau only wrote of one year of his two-year stay at Walden Pond, leaving out mundane details and combining the events of multiple days into one, a technique called “compression” (Source G).

Memoirs are not supposed to be history books but, like history books, they need to adhere to standards of truth even as they interpret what events or occurrences are meaningful, significant, or even just entertaining. In memoir, the author writes what he remembers to be important, regardless of whether or not his recollections are entirely accurate. Memoirs are
supposed to be a purposeful, engaging version of one’s life as thoughtfully recalled, not just a compilation or invented, exaggerated rendition of events. After all, “what is remembered becomes reality” (Hamp). For this reason, the memories should be “true enough” so that the author’s message conveys truths that are significant.

SAMPLE B

Among the different genres of writing, the memoir is the one in which the ideal of truth is least clear. The memoir sits somewhere between texts like historical documents and laboratory reports, in which the whole, objective truth is expected, and the various fictions, which are held to a much less rigorous standard. There is much disagreement about how accurate the facts of a memoirist must be, and how much he or she is “allowed” to bend the truth. All agree that to consider a text a memoir, there must be a palpable degree of “absolute” truth—the controversy is over how much.

The root of memoir is memory, which suggests the degree of truth that should be expected. We all have memories which are vague, ones which are clear, ones which are in one of the categories but seem as if they should be in the other. Sometimes memories change as we look back on them, sometimes we see that they were just wrong. This allows a degree of flexibility with the truth, but it must be remembered that it is still the truth. It may have different views of emphasis from another’s truth, but truth it remains.

Obviously, a memoir does not adhere to the exact historical truth—that is the realm of autobiography. What makes a memoir special is its ability to mold the truth which springs from its subjective viewpoint. Looking back, memoirists often attach meaning or emphasis to things which didn’t have them before—this is what makes memoir more than a history (Zinsser). Events which, at the time they took place, are not thought of as “prominent” can grow more important in the revised memory. The writer “[imposes] on the facts an organizing shape or notion—an idea—that hadn’t been attached to them before.” (Zinsser). This is not deception—this is analysis and evaluation.

Similarly, bringing dull memories from a life together is not lying or even deception. Combining memories is called “compression” and has been a staple of memoir for years—it allows what may or may not have been an interesting experience to be worth reading (Gutkind). Such a tactic allows us to draw some value from the work, perhaps something we could not have discovered had it not been used.

What you may not do, in a properly conceived memoir, is make up facts to suit your purpose. Thoreau and Frey are memoirists who, in trying to transfer their message, left the realm of memoir by fabricating the facts (Kertes). False memories that are simply remembered incorrectly are on thing, but “retrospective” memories that never existed are another.

When writers become so distracted by their intent that they fail to preserve the truth in their work, then the work ceases to be a memoir. These works deserve a more accurate label: historical fiction.

SAMPLE C

William Zinsser says in Source A “When nonfiction is raised to an art, it's usually because the writer imposed on the facts an organizing shape or notion—an idea—that hadn’t been
attached to them before.” In other words, if a story is to have meaning and significance it must have an underlying theme. This theme is absent in biographies and history books because of the need to adhere to the strict truth, which results in merely laying out the cold, hard facts and leaving the theme to self-interpretation or even nonexistent. However, in a memoir (which is generally known as “creative nonfiction”), an underlying theme is a necessity, and therefore, the truth may or may not be stretched to fit this theme.

Source D shows what is clearly fictional writing. There is a difference between embellishing the truth and blatant lying. It is highly improbable that the character writing the memoir was actually born in a dumpster or raised by sewer rats. This is not a memoir. What James Frey did in his book A Million Little Pieces was nowhere near as drastic as what the boy in Foxtrot is trying to do. As Kertes writes about Frey in Source E, “He may have been lying but he was not faking.”

Memoirs like James Frey’s deserve credibility because they “transform experience into meaning,” as is said in Source F. Memoirists write “in the service of a higher truth” (Source E) in order to convey meaning to their life experiences when they embellish the truth. Sometimes, it may even be necessary. For example, in Tobias Wolff’s memoir This Boy’s Life, I am certain that not every word spoken in dialogue actually happened. However, it makes the story more believable and interesting, to keep the reader tuned in. After all, isn’t it critical to keep the reader interested when writing a story? It’s not selfishness, it’s good writing skills.

However, if the reader is constantly thinking, “There’s no way this happened,” then the writer has gone too far. The writer might as well take up inspirational fiction.

All in all, the most important element of a memoir is not to stick to black-and-white, 100% fact, but to convey a message. The complete truth of a memoir is merely a technicality.

In closing, I want to mention the story related in the movie Big Fish. The main character, whose life is recounted through flashbacks, uses real events in his life but dresses them up into wild tales that are barely believable. His son resents these “lies” but after his father’s death he views then realizes that parts of his father’s stories are from fact. The son’s eventual insight into the “truth” of his father’s “lies” gives the whole story a mystical and inspirational tone. And isn’t the effect of a story what stays with the audience longest?