The Simple AP® English Language Synthesis Essay Cheat Sheet

The Synthesis Task

What You Get

FRQ 1: a short intro to a debatable issue + 6–7 sources (texts, data, at least 1 visual).
Task: take a position on the issue & use at least 3 of the sources as evidence for it.
Timing: a 15-min reading period for all FRQs, then ≈ 40 min to write this essay in full.

Row	Pts	Rewards
A: Thesis	0–1	Defensible position
B: Evidence	0–4	3+ sources + commentary
C: Sophistication	0–1	Complex thinking

What Readers Want

Your argument leads & the sources serve it; it's an essay on the issue, not a source report.
Conversation: show how the sources agree, clash or complicate each other on your reasons.
Commentary: explain how each source's evidence supports your claim; quotes alone score low.

Prompt Verbs

"Evaluate" prompts want a judgment (most important, most effective), not a neutral list.
"Develop your position" → you must take a stance on the issue, not stay neutral.
No outside research is needed; the sources & intro supply all of the evidence you need.

⚠ Summarizing each source in turn is the #1 synthesis mistake; it reads as a report.

✓ Treat the sources as a panel of experts; you're the moderator w/ your own view.

Reading the Sources

Annotate Fast

For each source: jot its position (+, –, mixed), key evidence & 1 word on credibility.
Source info: the author & publication above each source tell you how credible it is.

Note	Ask
Author	Expert? Advocate?
Date	Current or dated?
Type	Study, op-ed, data?
Stance	For, against, mixed?
Key line	Quotable phrase?

Visual Sources

Charts: read the title, axes, units & date; write 1 sentence on what the data shows.
Cartoons: name the claim the image makes & how it makes it (exaggeration, labels, irony).

Sort by Reason

Group sources by the reason they support (cost, safety, fairness), not by their letter.
Find tension: which 2 sources disagree, or read the same data differently? Note it.
Bias ≠ useless: a biased source still shows what 1 side believes; name its interest.
Mark quotables: underline 1 short phrase per source you could quote; skip long passages.

⚠ Don't skip the visual source; it's a fast way to add data & a 3rd cited source.

✓ Read the prompt 1st, then the sources; you'll know exactly what to look for in each one.

Taking a Position (Row A)

Defensible Thesis

Row A (1 pt): a thesis that answers the prompt w/ a position a reader could disagree with.
Defensible: restating the prompt or just summarizing the sources earns 0 for Row A.

Stance	Looks like
Defend	X should happen because...
Challenge	X shouldn't, because...
Qualify	X only if / when...
Prioritize	Factor A matters most

Strong vs. Weak

Weak: "There are many sides to the start-time debate." → no position, so it scores 0.
Strong: "Districts should start high school after 8:30 a.m. b/c it improves health & grades."
Qualified: "Later starts help most where buses can be rescheduled cheaply." → adds nuance.

Write It First

Put the thesis at the end of a short 2–3 sentence intro, where readers look for it first.
Answer the exact question: if it asks what matters most, name 1 factor & say why.
Thesis + reasons: "...b/c later starts improve health (B, D) & attendance (A, F)."

⚠ "Both sides have valid points" w/ no stance is fence-sitting & earns no thesis point.

✓ Pick the side the MOST sources support, not just the one you personally prefer.

Planning in the Reading Period

A 15-Minute Plan

Minutes	Do this
0–2	Read the prompt; note key words
2–11	Read & annotate sources
11–14	Pick stance + 2–3 reasons
14–15	Map sources to reasons

Note key words in the prompt ("most important," "policy") & answer exactly that question.

Outline

Intro: context + thesis. **Body**: 1 reason per ¶, 2 sources each. **Close**: why it matters.
Reason ¶: topic sentence → source evidence → commentary → 2nd source → link to thesis.
Counter ¶ (optional): concede the strongest opposing source, then answer it w/ another.

Choose Sources Wisely

Use 4–5 sources when you can; it's a safe margin above the 3-source minimum for Row B.
Pair them: put 2 sources in 1 paragraph so they talk to each other; that's synthesis.
Pick 2–3 reasons: depth on a few reasons beats a thin tour of many in 40 minutes.
Ex outline: later starts → ¶1 health (B, D) → ¶2 attendance (A, F) → ¶3 cost (E vs. C).

⚠ Plan 1 paragraph per REASON, not 1 paragraph per source; your reasons drive the essay.

✓ Jot the outline in the margin; it keeps you on track when time starts to run short.

Using & Citing Sources

Citing

Cite every source you use: (Source A) or (Smith) after the evidence, even w/ paraphrase.
Signal phrase: "According to a 2023 CDC report (Source C), ..." adds credibility fast.

Method	When
Short quote	Memorable wording
Paraphrase	Data, long ideas
Summary	Main point only
Data	Stats, trends

Integrate, Don't Drop

Set up who the source is → give the evidence → explain how it proves your reason.
Embed: "Later starts, the study found, 'cut tardiness by a third' (Source D)."
Paraphrase data: "Source F shows tardiness falling from 22% to 15% after the change."
Signal verbs: argues, warns, reports, finds, concedes; each hints at the source's stance.
Represent fairly: don't twist a source's meaning; if it's mixed, say so & use both parts.
Go beyond: you may add your own examples, but the sources must carry the argument.
Ex: "Source D reports..." not "In Source D it says..."

⚠ Fewer than 3 cited sources caps Row B at 1 point, however strong the commentary.

✓ Cite as you write; adding citations at the end leads to missed or wrong labels.

Commentary & Line of Reasoning (Row B)

Row B Levels

Pts	What it looks like
4	3+ sources, commentary explains reasoning
3	3+ sources, some explaining
2	3+ sources, mostly summary
1	2 sources, little commentary
0	Restates or off-task

Commentary That Scores

Explain the link: how does the source's evidence prove your reason? Why does it matter?
Ex: "Source D's drop in tardiness matters b/c missed first periods hit math hardest."

Put Sources in Conversation

Agree: "Source B's survey reinforces Source D's data: students sleep more & arrive on time."
Complicate: "Yet Source E notes bus costs, so the benefit depends on how districts schedule."
Weigh: "Although Source A cites cost, Source C shows the health savings outweigh it."
Each ¶ ends by linking its reason back to the thesis, so the next ¶ can build on it.
Starters: "This matters because...," "What this reveals is...," "Taken together, A & C show..."

⚠ Two quotes in a row w/ no commentary between them = summary; Row B stays at 2.

✓ Aim for ≈ 2 sentences of commentary each time you use a source; that earns the 4th point.

Sophistication (Row C)

Ways to Earn It

Complexity: explain tensions in the issue (cost vs. health, freedom vs. safety) & why they matter.
Context: place the argument in a broader debate (public health, equity, technology).
Limits: explain the limits of a source or your own argument (small study, biased funder).
Implications: explain what follows if your position is adopted, for whom & at what cost.

What It Looks Like

Ex: "Later starts aren't just a schedule fix; they test whether schools design days for teens."
Qualify: "The policy works best in districts where bus routes can flex at low cost."
Thread it: raise the tension in the intro, return to it in each ¶ & resolve it at the end.
Avoid overclaiming: "proves" → "suggests."

What Doesn't Count

Not enough	Why
1 sentence of nuance	Must run throughout
Fancy words only	Style ≠ substance
"Some disagree"	No analysis of why
Listing both sides	No weighing

⚠ One "of course, some disagree" at the end won't earn Row C; it must run throughout.

✓ Easiest route: weigh 2 sources that clash & explain which matters more & why.

Traps, Timing & Checklist

Top Traps

Trap	Fix
Source-by-source ¶s	Reason-by-reason ¶s
Uncited evidence	Cite every use
Only 2 sources	Use 4–5
No position	Commit in thesis
Ignore visual	Use the data

Timing

Plan: 15 min reading (shared), then ≈ 40 min writing; the other 2 essays need time too.
Write order: thesis → body ¶s → short conclusion; a brief intro is fine if the body is strong.
Running late? Finish a body ¶ w/ commentary rather than a conclusion; Row B matters more.

Final Checklist

Thesis takes a clear position on the prompt's exact question, not just its topic.
3+ sources cited, each w/ commentary.
Sources talk to each other at least once.
Last 2 min: check every quote has a citation & every ¶ has commentary after evidence.
Each ¶ links back to the thesis; your reasoning, not the sources, drives the essay forward.

⚠ Don't copy the source intro text into your essay; readers have read it & it earns nothing.

✓ The 3 FRQs = 55% of your score; synthesis counts as much as each other essay.