The Ultimate 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) & a prompt to answer.

Task: write an argument that takes a position on the issue & uses at least 3 of the sources as evidence.

Timing: 15-min reading period for all FRQs; ≈ 40 min to write the synthesis essay is the usual plan for it.

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; sources serve it. The essay is about the issue, not a report on the sources.

Conversation: show how the sources agree, clash or complicate each other on each of your reasons.

Commentary: explain how each source's evidence supports your claim; quotes alone score low on Row B.

Prompt Verbs

"Develop your position on..." or "evaluate the most important factors..." → you must take a stance.

"Evaluate" prompts want a judgment (most important, most effective), not a neutral list of factors.

Topics: public debates, e.g., school start times, tech in classrooms, public art, college costs or local news.

No outside research is needed; the sources & the short intro give you all the evidence you must use to argue.

⚠ Summarizing each source in turn is the #1 synthesis mistake; it reads as a report, not an argument.

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

Reading the Sources

Annotate Fast

For each source: jot its position (+, −, mixed), its key evidence & 1 word on credibility in the margin.

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

Source info box: the title, author & publication are given above each source; use them for credibility.

Visual Sources

Charts & graphs: read title, axes, units & date; write 1 sentence on what the data shows & what it doesn't.

Cartoons & images: identify the claim the image makes & the techniques (exaggeration, labels, irony).

Sort by Reason

Group sources by the reason they support (cost, safety, equity), not by order or by their letter.

Find tension: which 2 sources disagree, or use the same data to reach different conclusions? Note it.

Bias ≠ useless: an advocacy group's source still shows that side's view; just name its interest openly.

Mark quotables: underline 1 short phrase per source you could quote; skip long passages entirely.

Ex note: "C: + / CDC data / strong / 'cut tardiness by a third'" → position, type, credibility & a quote.

⚠ Don't skip the visual source; it's often the fastest way to add hard data & a 3rd cited source to your essay.

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

Taking a Position (Row A)

Defensible Thesis

Row A (1 pt): a thesis that responds to the prompt w/ a defensible position; it may be anywhere, 1+ sentences.

Defensible: a reasonable reader could disagree; restating the prompt or summarizing sources earns 0.

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 debate over school start times." → no position, so it scores 0 for Row A.

Strong: "Districts should start high school after 8:30 a.m., b/c later starts raise both health & grades."

Qualified: "Later starts help most where buses can be rescheduled at low cost." → nuance for Row C.

Write It First

Put the thesis at the end of a short intro (2–3 sentences); readers look for it there first & it frames the essay.

Preview reasons (optional): a short list helps you & the reader stay on your line of reasoning.

Answer the exact question: if the prompt asks which factor matters most, name 1 factor & say why.

Thesis + reasons: "...b/c later starts improve health (Sources B, D) & raise attendance (Sources A, F)."

Concede in the thesis: "Despite bus costs, districts should..." signals a counterargument ¶ ahead in the essay.

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

✓ Pick the side you can support w/ the MOST sources, not necessarily 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," "community") & answer exactly that question.

Outline

Intro: context (1–2 sentences) + thesis. **Body**: 1 reason per ¶, 2 sources each. **Close**: so what? Stakes.

Reason ¶: topic sentence (reason) → source evidence → commentary → 2nd source → link to thesis.

Counter ¶ (optional): the strongest opposing source, conceded & then answered w/ another source.

Choose Sources Wisely

Best sources: specific data, expert views & vivid examples that clearly support 1 of your reasons.

Use 4–5 sources when you can; it's a safe margin above the 3-source minimum that Row B requires.

Pair them: put 2 sources in the same ¶ so they talk to each other; that's real synthesis at work here.

Ex outline: Thesis: later starts. ¶1 health (B, D). ¶2 grades & attendance (A, F). ¶3 cost objection (E vs. C).

Pick 2–3 reasons only; depth on fewer reasons beats a thin tour of 5 reasons in just 40 minutes of writing.

Skip the hook if time is tight; start w/ context.

Reread the prompt before you start writing.

⚠ Don't plan 1 paragraph per source.

✓ Write the outline in the margin; it keeps you on your line of reasoning when time starts to run short.

Using & Citing Sources

Citing

Cite every source you use: (Source A) or (Smith) after the evidence, even when you paraphrase it.

Signal phrase: "According to a 2023 CDC report (Source C), ..." adds credibility in a single phrase.

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 (the commentary).

Embed: "Later starts, the study found, 'cut tardiness by a third' (Source D)" reads smoothly in a sentence.

Paraphrase data: "Source F shows tardiness falling from 22% to 15% after the change in start time."

Use Sources Honestly

Represent fairly: don't twist a source's meaning; if it's mixed, acknowledge both parts of it honestly.

Go beyond: you may add your own examples or knowledge, but the sources must carry the argument.

Signal verbs: argues, warns, reports, finds, concedes, insists, estimates; each hints at the source's stance.

Credibility in a phrase: "a pediatric sleep researcher (Source B)" tells readers exactly why to trust it.

Ex: "Source D reports..." not "In Source D it says..."

⚠ Fewer than 3 cited sources caps Row B at 1 point, no matter how strong the commentary is.

✓ Cite as you write; adding citations at the end of the essay leads to missed or mislabeled sources.

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 this source's evidence prove your reason? Why should your readers care?

Ex: "Source D's drop in tardiness matters b/c lost first periods hit core classes like 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 each district schedules."

Weigh: "Although Source A cites cost, Source C shows the savings in health care outweigh it over time."

Keep the Line

Each ¶ ends by linking its reason to the thesis.

Commentary starters: "This matters because...," "What this reveals is...," "Taken together, A & C show..."

Ex ¶ close: "Healthier students, then, are the 1st reason later starts pay off, & the gains don't stop there."

Name the source in your commentary, too ("Source C's data shows..."), so readers track which voice is speaking.

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

✓ Aim for ≈ 2 sentences of commentary per source use; that's where the 4th Row B point usually lives.

Sophistication (Row C)

Ways to Earn It

Complexity: explain the tensions in the issue (cost vs. health, freedom vs. safety) & why they matter.

Context: situate the argument in a broader debate (public health, equity, technology change) & explain.

Limits: explain the limits of your own argument or of a source (a small study, a biased funder, old data).

Style: a vivid, persuasive style throughout can earn it, but it's the hardest route; don't rely on it alone.

What It Looks Like

Ex: "Later starts aren't just a scheduling fix; they test whether schools design days for teens' biology."

Qualify precisely: "The policy works best in suburban districts, where bus routes can flex at low cost."

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

Implications: explain what follows if your position is adopted, for whom, & at what cost or benefit to them.

Ex weighing: "Source E's cost data is real, but it counts buses, not lost learning; Source D shows that cost."

Thread it: introduce the tension in the intro, return to it in each ¶, & resolve it in the conclusion.

Avoid overclaiming: "proves" → "suggests."

⚠ Row C needs sustained complexity; a lone "of course, some disagree" at the end won't earn it.

✓ Easiest route: weigh 2 sources that clash & explain which matters more & why, w/ evidence from both.

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

Suggested: 15 min reading (shared), then ≈ 40 min writing; the other 2 essays need their own time.

Write order: thesis → body ¶s → short conclusion; a brief intro is fine if the body paragraphs are strong.

Running late? Finish a body ¶ w/ commentary rather than writing a conclusion; Row B matters more.

Final Checklist

Thesis takes a clear position on the exact question.

3+ sources cited, each w/ commentary.

Sources talk to each other at least once.

Each ¶ links back to the thesis; your reasoning, not the sources, drives the essay forward to its end.

Last 2 min: check every quote has a citation & every ¶ has commentary after its evidence, not just quotes.

Typed in Bluebook: you can move & revise text freely, but save 2 min to proofread quotes & citations.

Conclusion: 2–3 sentences on the stakes, not a recap.

Off-topic drift: reread the prompt midway through writing to check every ¶ still answers its exact question.

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

✓ The 3 FRQs together = 55% of your exam score; synthesis is worth as much as each other essay.