Writing a Synthesis Essay

AP Lang – Mrs. Poska

The synthesis essay should aim to present and develop a complex claim that unfolds over the course of the essay. The idea is to recognize nuance and conditionality – as in, yes, college is a good thing, but for whom? When? Why? When might it not be worthwhile? We don’t want to sing its praises without acknowledging that there are some major downsides.

Thinking it through will actually give you something to write about in your essay without just rehashing the same point over and over again, using platitudes (for ex., good people go to college), or sounding uninformed (for ex., everyone who goes to college is successful). Avoid being repetitive in the points you make – you need to make a series of points that address multiple aspects of the argument building to support your claim. One of these points must address an argument in support of an opposing claim (CONCESSION) and you must refute it (COUNTERARGUMENT), in a paragraph of its own mostly.

Step 1. READ THE PROMPT. And make sure you are clear about what the prompt is asking you to do. Remember this is an ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY.

Step 2. Read the sources, and identify the argument, any biases, and evidence used for each. Here is Source A completed as an example; complete the remaining examples.

Source A:

Argument: So-called blue collar jobs can not only provide steady employment, but they can also be fulfilling, contrary to the current discourse which has emphasized the “knowledge economy.” Leveling a critique at education

Bias: Written during the economic downturn; writer probably went to college.

Evidence: Marge Piercy poem; the steady flow of work at a car mechanic; Princeton economist; a shop teacher

Source B:

Argument:

Bias:

Evidence:

Source C:

Argument:

Bias:

Evidence:

Source D:

Argument:

Bias:

Evidence:

Source E:

Argument:

Bias:

Evidence:

Source F:

Argument:

Bias:

Evidence:

Step 3. Identifying the Issues / Recognizing Complexity

Your job here is to use the sources, so you need to think a bit about how they are addressing the question of college’s value. What criteria are they using measuring the value? On what grounds? List five factors that pop up the most in the sources. I’ve given you one example so now you only have to come up with four. Phrase as a question, and LEAVE A BIG SPACE BETWEEN QUESTIONS. You will be listing other things underneath these questions to make an outline.

For ex. Earnings / Wages - Will you earn more money if you go to college?

Step 4. Put a star next to the three or four that you think are the most relevant / your best.

Step 5. Now, using the data that you find in the sources, answer each of the three questions you starred in a full sentence. The answer should not just be a summary of a source, but what you see or observe based on the data. Magic -- now you’ve got three potentially good topic sentences! Paper is shaping up quite nicely.

Step 6. Now think—which sources could you use to support each of the three claims – and how? Under each of your statements list two to three sources that you think you can USE (somehow, any way – the logic has to be your own).

Step 7. What’s your point?

Now that you’ve considered some of the factors and the evidence as to the value of college, what are you going to argue? Or better still, what can you argue? Be practical—now is not the time to go all ideological. Your argument does not have to reflect your personal views or what you think you should do. It has to be one that can apply in many cases and under many conditions, and it also needs to be in dialogue with the sources so you have to address the factors that they raise in some way.

So given what you’ve got for factors…what is the big idea that is emerging from your outline?

Attempt One:

Keep trying to make it better – push a little harder with your thinking and try to use better language each time.

Attempt Two:

Attempt Three: