Writing a Synthesis Essay

Now that you have read the sources in this chapter’s Conversation on mandatory community service, let’s walk through the process of synthesizing the sources and then writing a synthesis essay. As you move from reading and analyzing the sources to integrating them into your own writing, you will engage in a process of selection. This is often a complex step in which, ideally, you explore the individual texts and start to see connections among them. Essential to this process is your willingness to understand each text on its own terms, even if you disagree with the ideas or position; in fact, texts that present viewpoints different from those you initially hold are often the ones that become most important to the development of your argument.

Identifying the Issues: Recognizing Complexity

The fact is, you can rarely change a reader’s mind, at least not radically or immediately. Instead, what you want to aim for is a compelling argument that leaves the reader thinking, questioning, considering, and reconsidering. To do this, you have to acknowledge that the issue at hand is a complex one with no easy solutions and a variety of valid perspectives on the matter. You want to present a reasonable idea in a voice that is logical, sincere, and informed. To write a qualified argument, you must anticipate objections to your position and recognize and respect the complexities of your topic. A reasonable voice recognizes that there are more than two sides to an issue—more than pro–con, which is the written equivalent of a shouting match.

Careful reading has already revealed some of the complexities surrounding the issue of mandatory community service in schools. Let’s explore a few.

- Source 1, the excerpt from Millennials Rising, describes what community service has meant for various generations, ranging from Selective Service in the early twentieth century to service learning today.

- Source 2, the mission statement from the Dalton School, offers an argument for community service based on morality and a sense of responsibility to a community. However, the statement is from a small private school. Might this limit its wider application?

- Source 3, “Volunteering Opens Teen’s Eyes to Nursing,” is quite positive and possibly persuasive if you are writing in support of community service. However, it focuses on the experience of a seventh-grader, which might not be relevant to high schools.

- Source 4, on resume padding, is a good counterexample to Source 3. It reports on the cynical attitude of students who perform community service specifically to bolster their college applications. Would nationwide manda-
tory community service eliminate this issue? Would it make it more difficult for truly altruistic students to distinguish themselves?

- Source 5, on mandatory volunteerism, reports that requiring community service may discourage future involvement, making it less likely that volunteering will become a lifelong habit. Does this finding ring true for you?

- Source 6, the graphs from Mark Hugo Lopez’s study, raise further questions about required community service. Graph 1 shows that support for requiring such service is weakest among those currently in school and is evenly split among those over the age of twenty-one. Does this finding suggest that community service is “good medicine” for high school students, who will eventually appreciate the experience? Graph 2 shows that young people with greater levels of education (“Educationally Successful,” signifying completion of a BA or some college work, as opposed to only a high school education) are more likely to support a community service requirement in high schools.

Formulating Your Position

Before you formulate your position, it might be helpful to take stock of the issues. In analyzing the texts on community service, the following issues emerge:

- Does requiring community service devalue it?
- Does requiring it discourage future participation?
- Does the positive experience that most volunteers have offset their initial reluctance to participate?
- How does the structure of the community service program affect its perceived value? Is it part of academic study? Are there choices?
- How would making community service mandatory affect the fact that many students volunteer for selfish reasons, namely, padding their resumes for college?
- What values about community and education underlie a service requirement?
- Does requiring volunteer work go beyond the jurisdiction of schools? If it’s not done during school hours, are the requirements violating students’ rights? After all, mandatory community service is a punishment for minor criminals.
- What influence does socioeconomic status play in such a requirement? For example, if students need to earn money in their free time, can required community service programs be designed to accommodate them?
- How does a school system determine how many hours of service to require?

These questions—and others you might have—illustrate the complexity of the issue and ensure that you do not develop an argument that is one-sided or polarized
between yes and no. Instead, you are now prepared to write a documented essay that reflects the complexities surrounding the topic.

With these questions and issues in mind, you can begin to formulate a thesis, or claim, that captures your position on the topic. Consider the following working thesis statements:

- Community service can be extremely valuable in the development of both character and academics, but the negative effects of forcing students to participate by making it a graduation requirement more than offset the benefits.
- Though students may not recognize the value of community service until later in life, high schools should require community service to instill a sense of civic responsibility and encourage a lifelong habit of helping others.
- High schools should encourage students to participate in community service and reward those who do so without making participation mandatory for graduation.
- Required community service programs are beneficial to both the individuals who participate and the communities being served, as long as students have some choice in the type of service they engage in.

Although you might want to tailor one of these working thesis statements to use in your essay, each one suggests a clear focus while acknowledging the complexities of the issue.

**ACTIVITY**

Of the thesis statements above, select one you disagree with. Then, using the readings in the Conversation on mandatory community service, find three pieces of evidence supporting that thesis.

**Framing Quotations**

When writing with sources, it's important not to simply summarize or paraphrase the sources. You need to use the sources to strengthen your own argument. One easy way to make sure the sources are working for you is to include a sentence or two of explanation or commentary with each quote. You might use a lead-in sentence, so your readers know what to look for, as is demonstrated below:

Even without a service learning requirement, today’s youth have shown that they are enthusiastic about serving the community. Howe and Strauss indicate that five out of six Millennials “believe their generation has the greatest duty to improve the environment” and would accept additional “civic duties” to bring about needed change.

Alternatively, you might follow a quote with a sentence or two of commentary to remind readers of your point and how the quote reinforces it, as you see here:
The Dalton School, a small private high school, phrases it hopefully in the mission statement, which speaks of “empowering” students and “situating our moral center.” It continues on to argue (rather ominously) that “we must engage in community service because . . . we need our communities to survive.” The strong goals stated in this argument are certainly attractive, but their loftiness seems far removed from what a student might practically aim to achieve. In this regard, the Dalton School’s teaching goals are admirable but impractical because they seem to forget the individual student.

And, of course, be careful not to represent ideas or words as your own if they are not: give credit where it is due!

**Integrating Quotations**

When using multiple sources in your writing, it becomes even more important to incorporate the quotations in a way that is both clear and interesting. You want the transition from your own voice to others’ words and ideas to be smooth and natural sounding. The most effective way to accomplish this is to integrate the quotations into your own sentences. This may be a bit challenging, but the benefit is seamless prose. When you integrate quotations in this way, the reader can follow your ideas and see the sources in the context of your argument. Be sure that the result is a grammatically correct and syntactically fluent sentence, like this one:

Howe and Strauss indicate that five out of six Millennials “believe their generation has the greatest duty to improve the environment” and would accept additional “civic duties” to bring about needed change.

**• ACTIVITY •**

Below you will find a paragraph written using the mission statement from the Dalton School as a source. Read the paragraph, and then revise it in order to make more effective use of the source.

Proponents of mandatory service learning programs often argue that whether a student chooses for himself or not, the spirit of service is important for students to learn and for schools to teach. The Dalton School, a small private high school, opens its mission statement by asserting, “Community Service is something that needs to be done.” The argument is that this experience “teaches us through experience—about the relationship between empathy and responsibility, about what it takes to be part of a community, in essence, about being human.” The strong goals of the Dalton School’s program are attractive because they emphasize the importance of having each individual “play a role in contributing to our communities so that these communities can continue to survive and prosper.” The contribution this experience makes to academic growth is not the only emphasis, though it is important: “Our school is a place of learning; we
need to integrate the ideals of Community Service into our academic curricu-

lum." The heart of the Dalton School's program is, however, what they term the
"moral center" that "will fortify a community." This is more than merely service;
it is "that place where we can find the values of empathy, compassion, and car-
ing" and "is the basis for civic responsibility and the success of that community."

Citing Sources

Since you will be quoting from several works, you have to keep track of your
sources for your reader. In timed situations, you'll probably include only the
source number or the author's name in parentheses after the quote or paraphrase,
like this:

Modern Americans will recognize the term "service learning," a phrase made familiar
by the two-thirds of public schools that have integrated community service into the
educational curriculum (Howe and Strauss).

You need to cite paraphrases as well, not just direct quotes. Anytime you are using
someone else's ideas, you must give them credit.

Another, more elegant, option is to mention the author and title of the work
in the sentence introducing or including the quote:

Howe and Strauss indicate that five out of six Millennials "believe their generation
has the greatest duty to improve the environment" and would accept additional "civic
duties" to bring about needed change.

If you are writing a more formal research paper, you will likely need to follow
MLA documentation procedures, including a Works Cited page. Ask your teacher
if you are unclear about what is required for an assignment. Guidelines for MLA
documentation appear in the back of this book.

As you go through the readings and other texts in the following chapters, you
will join conversations on a range of topics, reflecting on and integrating the ideas
of others from different times and places into your own thinking and writing.
Each chapter includes a Conversation in which you will practice this skill with a
series of texts (including visuals) related to the chapter's theme. You should also
be aware of the conversations going on around you all the time. How do people
call on sources to reinforce their positions? And how do people enter an ongoing
conversation and move it forward?

A Sample Synthesis Essay

Following is a brief synthesis essay about community service that incorporates the
sources we have discussed. Note how the viewpoint expressed in the thesis state-
ment remains central, with sources supplementing and supporting that view.
Americans today will recognize the term “service learning,” a phrase made familiar by the two-thirds of public schools that have integrated community service into the educational curriculum (Howe and Strauss). However, according to Neil Howe and William Strauss’s book *Millennials Rising*, the term only came into our vocabulary with the newest, or “Millennial,” generation of Americans. In the past, people simply “volunteered.” Creating a new policy to enforce an age-old practice seems superfluous, and studies show that it actually discourages high school students from performing public service. Because mandating public service is unnecessary and can have a negative effect on students’ attitudes, schools should encourage students to participate in community service without making it mandatory for graduation.

Even without a service learning requirement, today’s youth have shown that they are enthusiastic about serving the community. Howe and Strauss indicate that five out of six Millennials “believe their generation has the greatest duty to improve the environment” and would accept additional “civic duties” to bring about needed change. Indeed, students are investing themselves in service activities for reasons other than to fulfill a school requirement.

*A Detroit News* article introduces us to thirteen-year-old John Prueter, for example, who began volunteering at an assisted-living home when his great-grandmother became a resident there. Prueter had “always [been] close to” his great-grandmother, and this genuine, personal investment in his work, the article tells us, was what made the experience meaningful for him. Prueter’s example demonstrates that the most beneficial service experiences—for the individual and the community—are those that students can and do choose for themselves.

It has also been shown that making public service compulsory can extinguish the natural spirit of volunteerism. According to two studies published in the journal *Psychological Science*, harsh requirements mandating community service “can have negative effects on students’ intentions to volunteer freely in the future.” The same studies also found that students were more likely to volunteer in the future if they began volunteering out of “free choice.” Furthermore, the sense that service learning is “required” not only to graduate high school but to get into a good college has driven many students to volunteer out of self-interest rather than altruism. “Many young people said that their motive in becoming involved was to make a stronger case to please college admissions officers.”
reported an article in the *University of Wisconsin–Madison News*. High schools should not support this distorted mind-set by explicitly requiring public service; rather, they should allow authentic enthusiasm and encourage service projects of the students’ own choosing.

Proponents of mandatory service learning programs may argue that whether a student chooses it for himself or not, the spirit of service is important to learn and to teach. The Dalton School, a small private high school, phrases it hopefully in the mission statement, which speaks of “empowering” students and “situating our moral center.” It continues on to argue (rather ominously) that “we must engage in community service because . . . we need our communities to survive.” The strong goals stated in this argument are certainly attractive, but their loftiness seems far removed from what a student might practically aim to achieve. In this regard, the Dalton School’s teaching goals are admirable but impractical because they seem to forget the individual student. And as Prueter’s case demonstrates, individual interest and personal investment are essential for service experiences to truly last.

On both sides of the debate, we should agree that the ultimate goal of “service learning” is precisely that—teaching an experience that will last. Even the Dalton School admits to the reality of school as a stop along the way to what happens when “an individual goes out in the world.” The issue thus concerns not just how to get students started volunteering, but how to maintain that desire to serve. At thirteen, John Prueter already knows that “his dream job . . . is working where he volunteers now.” His story, along with the data supporting “free choice” in service projects, proves that the surest way to have students volunteer in the future is to allow them experiences that are personally valuable. Those experiences will come not from any heavy-handed school requirement, but from support and, most important, the freedom of choice.

---

**Culminating Conversation**

**The Dumbest Generation?**

Students today live and learn in a world with vastly more complex technology than that of previous generations. Many people see this new technology as a way to expand and distribute knowledge. They call it the information age. Others lament