

SAMPLE AP SYNTHESIS QUESTIONS

Synthesis Question 1

READING TIME — 15 MINUTES

SUGGESTED WRITING TIME — 40 MINUTES

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 means of improving education, while others lament the negative effects of distraction that accompany it. There is also a long tradition of critics bemoaning the harmful effects of technological change on younger generations. In his best-selling book *The Dumbest Generation*, social critic and professor Mark Bauerlein claims that — as his title suggests — those under thirty comprise the “dumbest” generation in modern history. In his explanation of why he wrote the book, Bauerlein says, “I’ve noticed in the last ten years that students are no less intelligent, no less ambitious, but there are two big differences: Reading habits have slipped, along with general knowledge. You can quote me on this: You guys don’t know anything.”

Carefully read the following eight sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then synthesize information from at least three of the sources and incorporate it into a coherent, well-developed essay that evaluates the claim that the present, under-thirty generation is the “dumbest.”

Make sure that your argument is central; use the sources to illustrate and support your reasoning. Avoid merely summarizing the sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from, whether through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You may cite the sources as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the descriptions in parentheses.

Source A (Bauerlein)

Source B (Begley)

Source C (Ito)

Source D (Carr)

Source E (Simpson)

Source F (Johnson)

Source G (Thompson)

Source H (cartoon)

Source A

Bauerlein, Mark. *The Dumbest Generation*. New York: Penguin, 2008. Print.

The following is excerpted from a book about current affairs.

This is the paradox of the Dumbest Generation. For the young American, life has never been so yielding, goods so plentiful, schooling so accessible, diversion so easy, and liberties so copious. The material gains are clear, and each year the traits of worldliness and autonomy seem to trickle down into ever-younger age groups. But it's a shallow advent. As the survey research shows, knowledge and skills haven't kept pace, and the intellectual habits that complement them are slipping. The advantages of twenty-first-century teen life keep expanding, the eighties and nineties economy and the digital revolution providing miraculously quick and effortless contact with information, wares, amusements, and friends. The mind should profit alongside the youthful ego, the thirst for knowledge satisfied as much as the craving for fun and status. But the enlightenment hasn't happened. Young Americans have much more access and education than their parents did, but in the 2007 Pew survey on "What Americans Know: 1989–2007," 56 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds possessed low knowledge levels, while only 22 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds did. In other words, the advantages don't show up in intellectual outcomes. The mental equipment of the young falls short of their media, money, e-gadgets, and career plans. The 18-year-old may have a Visa card, cell phone, MySpace page, part-time job, PlayStation 2, and an admissions letter from State U., but ask this wired and on-the-go high school senior a few intellectual questions and the façade of in-the-know-ness crumbles.

Source B

Begley, Sharon. "The Dumbest Generation? Don't Be Dumb." *Newsweek.com*. Newsweek, 24 May 2008. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

The following is excerpted from an article in a national magazine.

A more fundamental problem is what Bauerlein has in mind by "dumbest." If it means "holding the least knowledge," then he has a case. Gen Y cares less about knowing information than knowing where to find information. . . . And it is a travesty that employers are spending \$1.3 billion a year to teach basic writing skills, as a 2003 survey of managers found. But if dumb means lacking such fundamental cognitive capacities as the ability to think critically and logically, to analyze an argument, to learn and remember, to see analogies, to distinguish fact from opinion . . . well, here Bauerlein is on shakier ground.

First, IQ scores in every country that measures them, including the United States, have been rising since the 1930s. Since the tests measure not knowledge but pure thinking capacity — what cognitive scientists call fluid intelligence, in that it can be applied to problems in any domain — then Gen Y's ignorance of facts (or of facts that older people think are important) reflects not dumbness but choice. And who's to say they are dumb because fewer of them than of their grandparents' generation care who wrote the oratorio "Messiah" (which 35 percent of college seniors knew in 2002, compared with 56 percent in 1955)? Similarly, we suspect that the decline in the percentage of college freshmen who say it's important to keep up with political affairs, from 60 percent in 1966 to 36 percent in 2005, reflects at least in part the fact that in 1966 politics determined whether you were going to get drafted and shipped to Vietnam. The apathy of 2005 is more a reflection of the world outside Gen-Yers' heads than inside, and one that we bet has changed tack with the historic candidacy of Barack Obama. Alienation is not dumbness.

Bauerlein is not the first scholar to pin the blame for a younger generation's intellectual shortcomings on new technology (television, anyone?), in this case indicting "the digital age." But there is no empirical evidence that being immersed in instant messaging, texting, iPods, video games and all things online impairs thinking ability. "The jury is still out on whether these technologies are positive or negative" for cognition, says Ken Kosik of the University of California, Santa Barbara, codirector of the Neuroscience Research Institute there. "But they're definitely changing how people's brains process information." In fact, basic principles of neuroscience offer reasons to be optimistic. "We are gradually changing from a nation of callused hands to a nation of agile brains," says cognitive scientist Marcel Just of Carnegie Mellon University. "Insofar as new information technology exercises our minds and provides more information, it has to be improving thinking ability."

Source C

Ito, Mizuko, et al. "Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project." *MacArthur Foundation*. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Nov. 2008. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

The following is excerpted from a report on the findings of a study of young people and digital media.

In both friendship-driven and interest-driven online activity, youth create and navigate new forms of expression and rules for social behavior. In the process, young people acquire various forms of technical and media literacy by exploring new interests, tinkering, and "messaging around" with new forms of media. They may start with a Google search or "lurk" in chat rooms to learn more about their burgeoning interest. Through trial and error, youth add new media skills to their repertoire, such as how to create a video or customize games or their MySpace page. Teens then share their creations and receive feedback from others online. By its immediacy and breadth of information, the digital world lowers barriers to self-directed learning.

Others "geek out" and dive into a topic or talent. Contrary to popular images, geeking out is highly social and engaged, although usually not driven primarily by local friendships. Youth turn instead to specialized knowledge groups of both teens and adults from around the country or world, with the goal of improving their craft and gaining reputation among expert peers. What makes these groups unique is that while adults participate, they are not automatically the resident experts by virtue of their age. Geeking out in many respects erases the traditional markers of status and authority.

New media allow for a degree of freedom and autonomy for youth that is less apparent in a classroom setting. Youth respect one another's authority online, and they are often more motivated to learn from peers than from adults. Their efforts are also largely self-directed, and the outcome emerges through exploration, in contrast to classroom learning that is oriented toward set, predefined goals.

Source D

Carr, Nicholas. "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic.com*. Atlantic Monthly Group, Jul./Aug. 2008. Web. 16 Mar. 2010.

The following is from a magazine article about the Internet.

Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going — so far as I can tell — but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

I think I know what's going on. For more than a decade now, I've been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet. The Web has been a godsend to me as a writer. Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of libraries can now be done in minutes. A few Google searches, some quick clicks on hyperlinks, and I've got the telltale fact or pithy quote I was after. Even when I'm not working, I'm as likely as not to be foraging in the Web's info-thickets — reading and writing e-mails, scanning headlines and blog posts, watching videos and listening to podcasts, or just tripping from link to link to link. (Unlike footnotes, to which they're sometimes likened, hyperlinks don't merely point to related works; they propel you toward them.)

For me, as for others, the Net is becoming a universal medium, the conduit for most of the information that flows through my eyes and ears and into my mind. The advantages of having immediate access to such an incredibly rich store of information are many, and they've been widely described and duly applauded. "The perfect recall of silicon memory," *Wired's* Clive Thompson has written, "can be an enormous boon to thinking." But that boon comes at a price. As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.

Source E

Simpson, R. Smith. "Are We Getting Our Share of the Best?" *Foreign Service Journal* Nov. 1962: 25-27. Print.

The following is excerpted from an article that appeared in a U.S. government journal.

My initial surprise was to find among the candidates an abysmal ignorance of so elementary a subject as the geography of the United States. Few could even place accurately the principal rivers: one with so descriptive a name as the Ohio was not infrequently identified as being "somewhere west of the Mississippi." Few could name the principal seaports, and, of course, any requirement demanding such detailed familiarity with this country as identifying the states comprising the "wheat belt" or the "corn belt" was completely beyond the average candidate's depth.

As to elementary economics and social data, most could only guess at the population, labor force and gross national product of their country. Many did not know what constituted "gross national product." They had no clear idea as to the principal products of their country, nor as to its exports and imports. They could name a few of each, but had no notion of their relative importance and had given no thought to the role of imports in the American economy.

As with elementary geographic and economic aspects of the United States, so with historical, sociological, and cultural. Americans abroad are asked a great many questions about their country. How did the United States acquire the Panama Canal? What is its status now? Who started our war with Spain (or Mexico) and what came out of it? When did our labor movement start and where does it stand now? How does a Jimmy Hoffa get control of a powerful union? What were some of the reform movements in American history? What became of them?

A good half of our candidates could answer such questions with only the thinnest recital of facts; many could not discuss them at all. Some could not recall ever having heard of the Populist movement; few knew its connection with Woodrow Wilson's "New Freedom." Asked if he knew anything about the Progressive movement, one candidate replied, "Oh, yes, that was LaFollette's movement." To the question, "Where did LaFollette come from?" he could only reply vaguely, "Somewhere out West."

Source F

Johnson, Steven. "Your Brain on Video Games." *Discover*. Kalmbach Publishing Co., 24 July 2005. Web. 20 June 2011.

The following is excerpted from an article in a national popular science magazine.

To understand why games might be good for the mind, begin by shedding the cliché that they are about improving hand-eye coordination and firing virtual weapons. The majority of video games on the best-seller list contain no more bloodshed than a game of Risk. The most popular games are not simply difficult in the sense of challenging manual dexterity; they challenge *mental* dexterity as well. The best-selling game of all time, *The Sims*, involves almost no hand-eye coordination or quick reflexes. One manages a household of characters, each endowed with distinct drives and personality traits, each cycling through an endless series of short-term needs (companionship, say, or food), each enmeshed in a network of relationships with other characters. Playing the game is a nonstop balancing act: sending one character off to work, cleaning the kitchen with another, searching through the classifieds for work with another. Even a violent game like *Grand Theft Auto* involves networks of characters that the player must navigate and master, picking up clues and detecting patterns. The text walk-through for *Grand Theft Auto III* — a document that describes all the variables involved in playing the game through to the finish — is 53,000 words long, the length of a short novel. But despite the complexity of these environments, most gamers eschew reading manuals or walk-throughs altogether, preferring to feel their way through the game space. . . .

Among all popular media today, video games are unique in their reliance on the regime of competence principle. Movies or television shows don't start out with simple dialogue or narrative structures and steadily build in complexity depending on the aptitude of individual viewers. Books don't pause midchapter to confirm that their readers' vocabularies have progressed enough to move on to more complicated words. By contrast, the training structure of video games dates back to the very origins of the medium; even Pong got more challenging as a player's skills improved. Moreover, only a fraction of today's games involve explicit violence, and sexual content is a rarity. But the regime of competence is everywhere.

Source G

Thompson, Clive. "Clive Thompson on the New Literacy." *Wired*. Condé Nast Digital, 24 Aug. 2009. Web. 15 June 2011.

The following is excerpted from a national technology magazine.

As the school year begins, be ready to hear pundits fretting once again about how kids today can't write — and technology is to blame. Facebook encourages narcissistic blabbering, video and PowerPoint have replaced carefully crafted essays, and texting has dehydrated language into "bleak, bald, sad shorthand" (as University College of London English professor John Sutherland has moaned). An age of illiteracy is at hand, right?

Andrea Lunsford isn't so sure. Lunsford is a professor of writing and rhetoric at Stanford University, where she has organized a mammoth project called the Stanford Study of Writing to scrutinize college students' prose. From 2001 to 2006, she collected 14,672 student writing samples — everything from in-class assignments, formal essays, and journal entries to emails, blog posts, and chat sessions. Her conclusions are stirring.

"I think we're in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven't seen since Greek civilization," she says. For Lunsford, technology isn't killing our ability to write. It's reviving it — and pushing our literacy in bold new directions.

The first thing she found is that young people today write far more than any generation before them. That's because so much socializing takes place online, and it almost always involves text. Of all the writing that the Stanford students did, a stunning 38 percent of it took place out of the classroom — life writing, as Lunsford calls it. Those Twitter updates and lists of 25 things about yourself add up.

It's almost hard to remember how big a paradigm shift this is. Before the Internet came along, most Americans never wrote anything, ever, that wasn't a school assignment. Unless they got a job that required producing text (like in law, advertising, or media), they'd leave school and virtually never construct a paragraph again.

But is this explosion of prose good, on a technical level? Yes. Lunsford's team found that the students were remarkably adept at what rhetoricians call *kairos* — assessing their audience and adapting their tone and technique to best get their point across. The modern world of online writing, particularly in chat and on discussion threads, is conversational and public, which makes it closer to the Greek tradition of argument than the asynchronous letter and essay writing of 50 years ago.

Source H

Chast, Roz. "Shelved." Cartoon. *New Yorker* 18 Oct. 2010. Print.

The following is a cartoon commentary.

