ESSAY SECTION TASKS

Yes, that's right—tasks. You'll need to write three different essays: synthesis, rhetorical analysis, and argument.

In the **synthesis essay**, you'll be given a scenario and tasked with writing a response using at least three of six or seven short accompanying sources for support. You'll need to cite the sources you use (in a simple format such as "Source A"), and incorporate them into your own position (instead of simply quoting them). At least one of the sources will be a visual (such as a picture, drawing, or graph) rather than text.

The **rhetorical analysis essay** asks you to analyze the techniques (such as choice of language or organization of evidence) an author uses, and discuss how those techniques contribute to the author's purpose. The passage you'll be asked to analyze is typically about one page long.

The **argument essay** presents a claim or assertion in the prompt and then asks you to argue a position based on your own knowledge, experience, or reading. You can choose to agree with the claim, disagree with it, or give it qualified support (for example, arguing that the claim is true only in certain circumstances).

In Chapters 5–7, you'll learn more about the approach and expectations for each type of essay.

For all three essays, you will be writing cold on a prompt or passage you read just two minutes ago for the first time. You have to come up with good ideas and get them written down efficiently—on the very first try.

Writing a clear, effective, well-organized essay under rigid time constraints is a learned skill; writing three consecutive essays under such conditions requires special techniques and lots of practice. Fortunately, this book provides you with both of those.

Three Rules for Successful Essay Preparation

1. Do plenty of TIMED practice on all three essay types.

2. Hand-write your practice essays; don't use a computer.

3. Ask for feedback on your essays from a trusted source (such as an English teacher or Princeton Review tutor).

Time Crunch

You'll have 2 hours to write all three essays, which allows about 40 minutes for each. Before you even start working on the essays, though, you'll have 15 minutes to read all three prompts and the source documents for the synthesis essay. While we suggest you use all 15 minutes, if you finish reading the prompts and the documents early, you may start writing your response.

This 15-minute period is crucial for building a solid foundation in understanding the prompts and the source documents. You'll need to put your active reading skills in high gear to get the best possible head start from the reading time available.

Why *Three* Essays?

The AP English Language and Composition Exam is designed to predict your ability to perform college-level work on such assignments as research papers and on-demand essay questions on tests. The AP exam's three types of essays give you an opportunity to demonstrate the important skills required for those types of college assignments:

- using research sources to support your own position
- examining sources critically in order to assess credible or faulty support
- arguing your own position persuasively

The three essays simply separate—and highlight—these skills. In college work, you'll often be combining them.

HOW ARE THE ESSAYS SCORED?

The essays are scored separately on a scale of 0–6; then the three scores are combined. Each essay has equal weight in that combined score, which is then combined with the result of the multiple-choice section to yield a final AP score of 1–5.

Together, the essays count for 55 percent of your final score. However, they take up 69 percent of the exam time, so it's easy to lose perspective and feel as if the essay section is more crucial to your success than it actually is. Doing well on the multiple-choice section is almost as important, even though it's only an hour long.

When awarding essay points, the readers consider three specific elements: the thesis statement, evidence and commentary, as well as the overall sophistication of the essay. Each of these areas has the possibility of earning a specified number of points, with a maximum of six points possible:

- Thesis: 0–1 point
- Evidence and commentary: 0–4 points
- Sophistication: 0–1 point

The thesis statement can earn a maximum of one point if it both responds to the prompt and presents a defensible position. No points are awarded for thesis statements that merely paraphrase the prompt, summarize the issue, are off topic, or are absent.

Evidence and commentary weigh most heavily and can earn up to four points. Readers are looking for evidence that is specific and supports all claims in a line of coherent reasoning. Furthermore, they are looking for consistent commentary that explains *how* the evidence supports the essay's reasoning. Essays lose points when evidence is general or irrelevant. Further point loss occurs when the commentary merely summarizes the evidence or develops a faulty line of reasoning.

Essays are graded analytically, based on:

- your ability to state a clear thesis
- your ability to present concrete evidence and link it to your thesis
- your skillful use of sophisticated language to develop your argument

Like the thesis, sophistication can also earn an essay up to one point. This point is awarded if the essay presents a complex argument and articulates the implications or limitations of that argument. Readers are also looking for essays that use effective rhetorical techniques to convey that argument throughout the essay. Specifically, the readers award this point for essays that are written in a style that is both persuasive and vivid.

In Chapters 5–7, you'll learn some more details about how these parameters apply to each type of essay.

Who Does the Scoring?

The readers are college English professors and AP course teachers who come together in June for an intense week of scoring. Thousands of readers go through thousands of essays in a few short days. A different person will read each of your essays.

Before the scoring starts, though, readers are trained in assessing that particular year's group of essays. The College Board, the nonprofit organization that develops the exam, combs through the current crop of essays looking for work that represents a top-level 6 synthesis essay, a mediocre 3 rhetorical analysis essay, and so on, from that year's group. These sample essays are used to train the readers so the scoring will be as standardized as possible, given that the readers are still human beings who make subjective decisions.

So what? Well, the readers are your audience—the people you're addressing in your essays—and this scoring process tells you a few important things about them.

- First, they're buried in student essays, most of them mundane and mind-numbingly similar, and are just hoping for that one brilliant piece of writing that breaks the monotony and is a pleasure to read.
- Second, the readers have been trained to score your essays in relation to the work of the other students who took the exam that year. They're not judging your work in relation to some ideal standard of what a "perfect" essay should be.
- Third, these are teachers who guide students through English composition for a living. They know that polished essays require time, draft after draft, revision after revision. They don't expect an essay written in 40 minutes to be polished or perfect—they couldn't produce a flawless essay themselves in 40 minutes.

The essay section is the only place in this exam where your personality—at least to a limited degree—will shine through to test graders. Use it as an opportunity to show off what an exceptional thinker and writer you are.

WHAT ARE THE KEYS TO EARNING POINTS?

Your goal is to rise above the vast middle bulge of essays. You're aiming to earn the most points possible. How do you get there? By familiarizing yourself with the types of essays you'll have to write and by following a few basic tips.

Understand the Prompt

Use your active reading skills to tear the prompt apart.

- What is the prompt *really* asking you to do? Understanding your task and maintaining a laser focus on it will keep you out of the swamp of inappropriate examples and unrelated arguments that populate the lower levels of the scoring scale.
- Does the prompt have broader implications? For example, if a quote in the argument essay prompt states that a government has a duty to protect its citizens, could carrying out that duty lead to undesirable limits on people's freedom? And protect citizens from what? Who says that's a government's duty? The key here is to demonstrate some depth of thought instead of simply taking the prompt at face value. Where does it lead you?
- Does the prompt contain any terms that you should define in order to keep your discussion on target? Broad, "fuzzy" concepts such as "justice" or "education" are prime examples. They mean different things to different people. Giving a precise explanation of how you understand the term *as it's used in the prompt* and how you intend to discuss it will help you avoid producing a vague, rambling essay.

Tip:

Underline the action verbs in the prompt to keep you focused. Common verbs are: "explain," "select and use evidence," "argue your position," and "demonstrate an understanding of the rhetorical situation."

Take a Position

No fence-sitting, no ambiguity, no neutral descriptive essays. The highest scoring essays take a definite position on the prompt topic and argue it convincingly. They use strong, relevant, and specific evidence to support the position and leave no doubt about where the essay writer stands.

Even in the rhetorical analysis essay you're expected to take a position: "This is the author's purpose, these are the three (or four, or five) most important techniques the author uses to achieve that purpose, and (very important) this is *how* each technique makes the purpose more effective." Another student might see a different purpose or highlight other techniques in the passage, but then that student would be taking a different position.

Manage Your Time

No one is going to tell you that your first 40 minutes are up and it's time to move on to the next essay. That's up to you. Since each essay has equal weight in the combined score, you should devote about the same amount of time to each one. A slightly better score on one essay will not make up for a bad score on another. Aim for the following breakdown within each 40-minute period:

- 3–5 minutes to think through the prompt and plan your essay
- 30–35 minutes to write
- 1–2 minutes to proofread

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Even though you're under tremendous time pressure, don't use shorthand symbols such as "&" or "w/" or "tho." Get into the habit of using a relatively high level of discourse on AP exam essays. Writing in the style of a casual email or text message won't impress the reader who is scoring your essay.

The more you practice writing each type of essay within 40 minutes, the more you'll gain a sense of how that block of time "feels" and the better you'll get at making occasional time checks to stay on track instead of engaging in distracting clock-watching that might only increase your anxiety.

Your school has likely given you sample essay prompts for practice. You can also find example prompts from several previous years on the AP website at https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-english-language-and-composition/exam.

Plan Your Response

Just getting into the car and starting to drive could land you anywhere, at a great waste of time and fuel. It's the same with just starting to write—you could easily spend 20 minutes and then realize you're seriously off track.

To make the best use of your 30–35 minutes of writing time, you first need to spend a few minutes planning where you want to end up and how you'll get there.

- Exactly what do you want to conclude about the topic of the synthesis prompt? Which three sources best support the points you want to make? In which order should you incorporate them into your discussion? Does one of the sources present a significant opposing argument that you should mention and then refute?
- In the rhetorical analysis passage, what is the writer's purpose? What techniques make that purpose clear and effective to you? In which order should you explain them?
- What position do you want to take about the topic presented for the argument essay? What evidence from your own experiences or reading could you use to support your position? How can you make your argument persuasive?

Organize Your Points

You're likely familiar with the five-paragraph essay model. While it's not the only method of organizing an essay, there's nothing wrong with using it on this exam if it's already a comfortable model for you. It goes like this:

Paragraph 1:

- An introductory sentence or two that captures the reader and announces, "This is going to be a great essay within your pile of boring, mediocre essays."
- The thesis that you intend to argue in your essay. A good thesis is debatable (that is, someone could possibly have a different opinion) and narrow enough to be covered adequately in a short essay.
- A brief list of the three pieces of evidence you'll use in the essay to prove your thesis
- A transition to the body of your essay

Paragraphs 2–4:

- One paragraph for each piece of evidence you listed in the first paragraph, in the same order as you listed them. Each piece of evidence should be as specific as possible: direct quotations from evidence or source texts, and/or detailed descriptions of personal or historical anecdotes. All evidence should be accompanied by commentary that explicitly describes how and why the evidence supports the paragraph's claim and the essay's thesis. One of these paragraphs might describe a conflicting view which you then shoot down, or which supports an "only in certain circumstances" position in your thesis.

Paragraph 5:

- A conclusion that doesn't simply restate your thesis. You've developed your argument throughout the body of your essay, so it's now meatier and more convincing. The conclusion should remind the reader of your now-stronger position.

Of course, there's no rule that says you have to stop at three pieces of evidence; you might have four. Just don't take on more complexity and length than you can handle well in 40 minutes. And if you're familiar with another method of organizing an essay and feel more comfortable with it, then use it, as long as it provides a clear organizational framework for your points.

Get Off to a Strong Start

A great first impression goes a long way. Remember your audience of bored readers mired in stacks of mediocre essays? If you can wow them right off the top, you'll create an expectation that the rest of your essay belongs in the "effective" band too. That initial glow of "finally—*finally*—a good essay!" can diminish the impact of later lapses in greatness.

Suppose the prompt for a rhetorical analysis essay quotes from a speech by Mayor Nellie Smith attributing her election victory to the many volunteers who worked on her campaign. You could clearly announce, "This is going to be a mediocre essay" by starting out with a sentence like, "This essay will describe how Mayor Nellie Smith uses rhetorical strategies to communicate the main point of her speech." Yawn. And do you have any clue what her main point is or what rhetorical strategies she uses? Even if you eventually do get to an insightful point later in the essay, chances are your opening has already caused the reader to tune out and miss it.

On the other hand, you could grab the reader's attention with an opening like, "Dedicated volunteers are the bricks and mortar of successful political campaigns. That's the overriding message of Mayor Nellie Smith's speech thanking them for their passionate support and acknowledging the key role they played. Through the skillful use of parallelism, repetition, and analogy, she makes her listeners feel that the victory is really theirs, likely winning their support after she takes office too."

That stronger start doesn't take a lot of extra effort or time, but it shows the reader that you understand the mayor's purpose and rhetorical strategies, and can express your ideas with style and sophistication. You've just raised the reader's impression of your abilities, even if your essay tapers off to a more routine effort later on.

Express Your Ideas Clearly, Specifically, Concisely, Correctly, Smoothly, Persuasively, and with Flair

Oh yes, you *can* do that.

Be clear. You should know exactly what you want to say as a result of your initial planning and organizing. Imagine yourself on a clear path instead of stumbling around in the underbrush. If you find you're getting tangled up in long sentences or overlapping ideas, pause for a minute and think of *telling* someone right beside you what you mean to say. This strategy usually helps clarify your thoughts and language in your own mind. Now write down what you just "said."

Be specific. Making a vague statement such as, "The demand for subsidized housing increased a lot during the past few years (Source A)" isn't good enough if Source A actually referred to a study that proved demand grew by 65 percent between 2010 and 2020. Being as specific and concrete as possible will add credibility and impact to your words. Your argument will be clearer and more persuasive.

Be concise. That doesn't mean leaving out details that are essential to your argument. It means leaving out pointless repetition and padding. Say it once, precisely and with punch, and then move on.

Say it correctly. Use proper grammar. Essays with so many errors that the reader can't follow the argument are consigned to the bottom of the scoring scale.

Create correct paragraphs too. Have you ever opened a book and seen nothing but very long paragraphs? Your next thought is probably, "Do I *really* have to read all of this?" That's exactly what readers think when they see an essay without paragraphs.

So create proper paragraphs—one main idea per paragraph, beginning with a topic sentence and ending with a smooth transition to the next paragraph—and make them obvious by leaving a space between or indenting them.

Create a great first impression before the person scoring your essay even reads a word.

- Write legibly.
- Make sure readers can see the paragraphs at first glance.
- Don't strike out too many things.
- Make sure your work looks neat, organized, and clear.

Say it smoothly. Lead the reader through your argument with seamless transitions between your points and paragraphs. Transition words and phrases such as "on the other hand," "in addition," "therefore," and "nevertheless" will do the job.

Say it persuasively. These essays are all evidence-based writing, so you need strong evidence that supports each of your main points. Connect each piece of evidence clearly to the point it supports, and explain exactly how or why the evidence is relevant. Unrelated evidence and vague, weak explanations won't persuade anyone.

The reader expects you to write like someone who is suffering through a tedious, nerve-wracking exercise. If you write like someone who enjoys writing, the reader will enjoy reading your essay and reward you.

Say it with flair. Is there a punchier, more descriptive word you could use? Perhaps "shack" or "cabin" or "mansion" instead of "house." Can you make the phrasing of a sentence slicker? For example, instead of "The candidate's appearance was neat, and the boss gave him the job right away," let yourself get carried away and say, "The candidate's Armani suit and sleek silk tie captivated the boss, who slipped a contract across the table without comment or hesitation."

It doesn't take long to think of a more forceful word or a stronger way of saying something if you put your mind on that track, and even a few of these sprinkled throughout your essay can impress the reader with your ability to control language and use it to achieve your desired effect.

Make it easy for the reader to give you a high score.

- Understand the task in the prompt.
- Think about where the prompt takes you.
- Stake out a definite position.
- Plan and organize your points before you start to write.
- Be clear and specific.
- Link each piece of evidence directly to your thesis.
- Use correct grammar and paragraph construction.
- Vary sentence length and structure.
- Write legibly.

Proofread

You won't have time to revise, but leaving a couple of minutes to proofread allows you to fix minor errors you probably would not have made if you weren't writing in such a rush. And that, in turn, might just knock your essay up a notch on the scoring scale. You'll have to write your essay in dark blue or black pen—no pencils allowed on this section of the exam. However, you can strike out any errors you want the readers to ignore (they will) and then write in (neatly) your correction.

In Chapters 5–7, you'll get a closer look at the types of prompts on the exam, and find additional suggestions for responding to the three different types.