

STUDYING ISN'T EVERYTHING

Many students neglect their test-taking skills, assuming that if they study hard, they will get a high score, and if they do not study, they will do poorly.

Have you ever studied really hard for an exam and then blown it on test day? Have you ever aced an exam for which you thought you probably hadn't studied enough? Most students have had one, if not both, of these experiences. The lesson should be clear: factors other than how much you've studied influence your final test score, particularly on a test such as the AP English Language and Composition Exam, where timing and pacing are important aspects of thorough preparation.

This chapter will provide you with some insights that will help you perform better on the multiple-choice section of the AP English Language and Composition Exam, and on other exams as well.

Pacing and Timing

A big part of scoring well on an exam is sharpening your awareness of time. Another is working at a consistent pace.

The worst mistake made by inexperienced test-takers is that when they come to a question that stumps them, rather than just skipping it, they panic and stall. Time stands still when you're working on a question you can't answer, and it is not unusual for students to waste five minutes on a single multiple-choice question (especially a question involving a long selection from the passage or the word EXCEPT) instead of cutting their losses and moving on to questions they *can* answer.

Every question is worth the same one point, whether it's a hard question or an easy one. The computer that scores your responses doesn't know whether you agonized for three minutes over a hard question or breezed through an easy one in a few seconds; it only knows whether your answer is right or wrong.

It is important to be aware of how much time you are spending on a given question or section. There are several ways to improve your pacing and timing for the test.

- **Know your average pace.** While you prepare for your test, gauge how long you take on a passage with 11 or so questions. Knowing how long you spend on average per passage (and per question) will help you identify how many passages you can read (and questions you can answer) effectively in 60 minutes, and how best to pace yourself for the test.
- **Have a watch or clock nearby.** You are permitted to have a watch or clock nearby to help you keep track of time. However, constantly checking the clock can be distracting and stressful. Devise a plan. Try checking the clock after every passage or two to see whether you are keeping the correct pace or need to speed up. This will ensure that you're managing your time but won't permit you to fall into the trap of dwelling on it.



Don't Waste Your Time

If you can't answer a question, make an educated guess and move on to the next question. Although you don't lose any points for wrong answers in the multiple-choice section, you don't want to waste time on a question you're unsure of because you will take away time from questions you're more likely to get correct.

- **Know when to move on.** Because all of the multiple-choice questions are scored equally, and you are not penalized for wrong answers, investing long stretches of time on a single question is inefficient and can potentially deprive you of the chance to answer easier questions later on. If you can eliminate answer choices with POE, do so, but on your first pass through the questions, just guess from among the remaining choices (using your Letter of the Day) and move on if you can't find the correct answer. Remember, tests are like marathons: you do best when you work through them at a steady pace.
- **Be selective.** You don't have to do the multiple-choice questions in order. If you are stumped by a question, guess, and move on to the next one. You might not have to answer every question correctly to achieve the score you want for your first choice college. Select the questions you can answer and work on them first. This will boost your confidence, make you more efficient, and give you the greatest chance of getting the most questions correct.
- **Use Process of Elimination on every question.** Every answer choice that you can eliminate increases the odds that you will answer the question correctly.

Remember, when all the questions are of equal value and you don't lose any points for incorrect answers, no single question is that important. Your overall goal for pacing is to get the most questions correct.

Getting the Score You Need

Depending on the score you need, it may be in your best interest *not* to try to work through every multiple-choice question. Check with the schools to which you are applying. If you're aiming for credit hours and need to score a 5, it's best to find out as early in your preparation as possible. On the other hand, if you're simply aiming for placement and you find out your first choice college sets the cut-off point at a score of 3, that may take some of the pressure off and ease your preparation anxiety.

Reducing Test Anxiety

No matter what score you need, everybody experiences anxiety before and during an exam. To a certain extent, test anxiety *can* be helpful. Some people find that they perform more quickly and efficiently under stress. If you have ever pulled an all-nighter to write a paper and ended up doing good work, you know the feeling.

However, too much stress is definitely a bad thing. If you find that your stress level prevents you from doing your best work during exams, here are a few strategies you can use to keep the stress from getting the better of you.



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- **Put it in perspective.** Evaluate your situation before the test begins. If you have understood and practiced all of the techniques we give for success on the exam, remind yourself that you are well-prepared. Remember that the scoring is based on how everyone does, so a question that is challenging across the board may still leave you ahead of the game. What matters most is that you make every effort to improve your chances on test day.
- **Don't fixate on how much you don't know.** Your job is to score as high as you can by maximizing the benefits of what you do know. Think of the test as a game. How can you get the most points in the time allotted?
- **Try to relax.** Slow, deep breathing works for almost everyone. Close your eyes, take a few slow, deep breaths, and concentrate on nothing but inhaling and exhaling for a few seconds. This is a basic form of meditation, and it should help clear your mind of stress and, as a result, help you concentrate better on the test. If you have ever taken yoga classes, you probably know some other good relaxation techniques you could use in the test setting.
- **Visualize.** Imagine your favorite park, beach, hiking trail, or room, and visualize yourself sitting there taking the exam—all alone, calm and relaxed, and enjoying your surroundings. You're still taking the test, but in a pleasant place instead of in a stress-filled atmosphere. Most likely you'll need to practice this technique in advance in order to be able to slip into another place mentally while you're taking the test. Try it while you're having breakfast, or riding the bus, or walking down a noisy, chaotic street.
- **Eliminate as many surprises as you can.** Make sure you know the testing location, how long it will take you to get there, and where to park if you're driving. Take a "dry run" trip to the test center before the day of the exam. Know when the exam room will open, when the actual exam starts, what type of questions you will be asked, and how long each section of the test will take. You don't want to be worrying about any of these things on the test day.
- **Plan to reward yourself.** After all, you deserve a reward for all of your hard work. Make a plan for doing something enjoyable right after the test is over. While you're preparing, keep thinking of the reward you've promised yourself.

The best way to avoid stress is to become familiar with the test material and practice doing exam questions under actual time constraints. (By reading this book, you are taking a major step toward a stress-free AP English Language and Composition Exam.)

In the next chapter, you'll have an opportunity to practice the strategies you've learned.