

# **AP English Language**

## *A Crash Course Study Guide*

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# Introduction

Thank you for downloading, *AP English Language: A Crash Course Study Guide*. These posts are a compilation from our site, where we provide hundreds of practice questions and review to know for a variety of AP exams, including AP English Language. You can check out more pointers, including our Ultimate List of AP English Language Tips, at our [blog](#). We hope you find this short collection helpful in your preparation for AP English Language! A few of the references to practice questions will not work since you're reading this in print, but you can go to our subject guide page to practice the questions mentioned throughout the book.

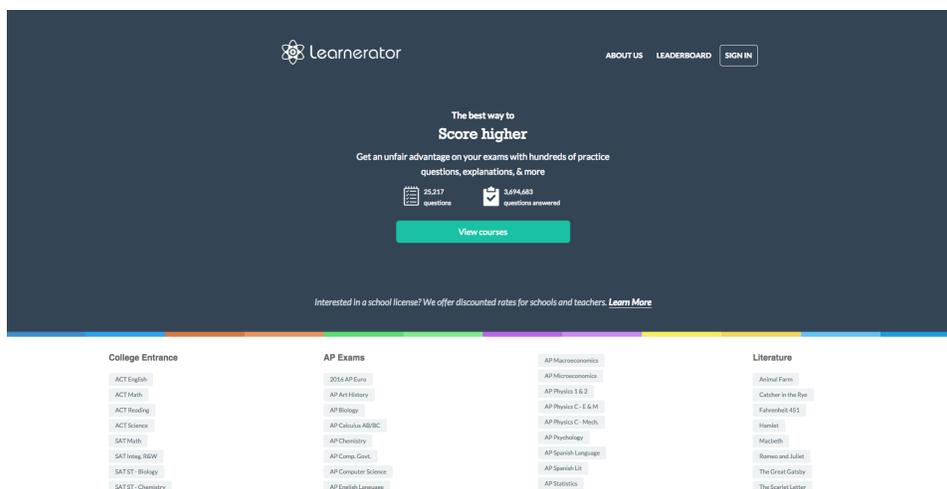
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# About Us

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# How to Tackle AP English Language Multiple Choice Questions

## General Overview

### Background Info on the AP English Language and Composition Exam

Before you start preparing for the multiple-choice section of the AP English Language and Composition exam, here are some things you should know: The multiple-choice section is 1 hour long and consists of 55 questions. Overall, it's worth 45% of your final exam grade.

The purpose of the multiple-choice section is to evaluate your ability to analyze the “rhetoric of prose passage.” This phrase was taken directly from the College Board’s Course Description handbook. Rhetoric is the art of writing (or speaking) effectively. When you analyze rhetoric, you focus on the composition of the writing. This includes grammar, word choice, figures of speech and other linguistic choices.

In other words, the multiple-choice section tests your ability to comprehend and then explain what an author is saying. In this case, you “explain” the author’s meaning by correctly choosing A, B, C, D or E.

Now that you know the breakdown and purpose of this section, let’s break down how to prepare for it.

## What to Study

### What To Study for the AP English Language Multiple-Choice Section

***Know your literary terms*** (e.g. polysyndeton, tone, antithesis etc.)

The best way to study literary terms and figures of speech is by using flashcards. Do not try to learn 100 literary terms two days before the exam. Spend 30 minutes every day for at least two weeks before the exam, committing terms to memory. Multiple-choice questions on literary terms are easy if you know the definition. Don’t lose points here!

- You can find a list of literary terms that have appeared on previous exams by Googling “AP English Language and Composition Exam: 101 Key Terms.” Create flashcards with these terms either online or by hand.
- This is what a question asking you about literary terms/figures of speech may look like:

Example: Recalling definitions—Figures of speech

The sentence beginning "Then the Pterodactyl bust upon the world [...]" (line 25) employs all of the following EXCEPT

1. Asyndeton
2. Hyperbole
3. Personification
4. Transition
5. Parallelism

How to answer: Recall the definition. To answer this type of question, you would need to know the definition of the options given in the answers. First re-read the indicated sentence, decide on an answer in your head, and match that answer to the options given. You may use process of elimination if you don't fully know the definition of one or more terms. Practice answering this question and other similar ones [here](#).

***Understand rhetorical function***

AP English Language multiple-choice questions often ask you to evaluate the meaning behind or the purpose of the author's rhetorical choices. There may be questions that ask you about the meaning or function of certain words, phrases, or sentences (in context of the passage). Sometimes, you are asked to explain why an author chose to use a certain figure of speech (e.g. asyndeton). Finally, sometimes you are asked to make inferences about complex sentence structure.

- These are what questions asking you about rhetorical function may look like:

Example 1: Explaining the function of a sentence

The primary rhetorical function of the sentence beginning with "It is for us the living [...]" (line 14) through the end of the speech is to

1. Recognize the fact that many people died in vain
2. Admonish the South for causing so much death
3. Recognize the North for its valor and courage
4. Unite the two factions of the war for the purpose of remembrance
5. Indicate the superiority of the Northern soldiers

How to answer: These types of questions want to you assess your ability to understand meaning in context. These questions are asking you “What does this sentence/phrase mean? What is its purpose?” To answer this type of question, you should quickly read the sentence before and the sentence after the specified line to help you pick up on context clues. You can practice by answering this question [here](#).

Example 2: Explaining figures of speech

"Nevertheless a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred" (lines 18-19). This line utilizes \_\_\_\_\_ to the rhetorical effect of \_\_\_\_\_.

1. Metaphor; allowing the reader to understand the differences between winning love and avoiding hatred
2. Antithesis; creating a contrast between the desired outcome and two undesirable options
3. Irony; explaining the idea that while one may not expect to avoid hatred, one can still do so and incite fear
4. Hyperbole; showing the extreme differences between the possible outcomes
5. Isocolon; using balance structure to imply a balanced approach to effective rule

How to answer: First, recall the definition. Remember the first tip about memorizing literary terms? Well, it also comes in handy here. Knowing the definition of various figures of speech will help you answer questions about the effect of rhetorical choices. The best way to answer is to first decide what the figure of speech is before referring to the explanations. This will help you eliminate options and save time. You can practice answering this question [here](#).

Example 3: Examining sentence structure

The structure of lines 49–56 (“During ... 1933”) can best be described as

1. An exaggeration followed by a series of qualifying statements
2. A movement from the particular to the general
3. A historical example followed by contemporary examples
4. A generalization followed by other generalizations
5. A claim followed by supporting details

How to answer: Think: “building blocks.” It’s all about the component parts of the sentence. If you are asked about word modification, break down the sentence into chunks to figure out the function of each word. If you are asked about the flow of the sentence (i.e. like in the above example), re-read the sentence before looking at the options, so you can eliminate incorrect answers more quickly. Remember that sentence structure is also a rhetorical choice. However, these types of questions are straightforward because they are not asking you about meaning or purpose.

### ***Learn new vocabulary***

Expanding your vocabulary in preparation for the test can be tough. Using context clues to guess the meaning of a word can help, but the best way to learn new words is to read. You can kill two birds with one stone if you read the works of authors whose prose often appear in the multiple-choice and/or essay section of the exam. You can find that list [here](#) (page 11). Don’t try to read everything! Pick a few works by one or two authors that intrigue you from each designated time period.

- You can find helpful lists of words that have appeared on previous exams by Googling “AP Language and Composition Test Vocabulary.”
- These are what questions relating to vocabulary may look like:

#### Example 1: Explain the meaning of a word in context

In context, the word “intimate” (lines 24–25) is best interpreted to mean

1. Suggestive and lyrical
2. Tender and friendly
3. Inexorably penetrating
4. Sensual and charming
5. Strongly private

How to answer: Focus on the context clues! Some vocabulary related questions on the AP English Language and Composition exam ask you to interpret the meaning of a word or phrase. The surrounding sentences will give you a better idea of the meaning of the specified word.

Example 2: Analyzing tone

The overall diction of the text can best be described as

1. Connotative
2. Didactic
3. Figurative
4. Journalistic
5. Casual

How to answer: Think: “tone.” That’s really all this type of question is asking. However, tone questions on the exam often use elaborate words/phrases, and that’s where vocabulary comes in. It helps to know the meaning of words like “connotative,” or “didactic” to answer this type of question. However, you can use process of elimination and context clues to help you answer the question. Practice answering this question and others like it [here](#).

You’ve probably noticed that for most of the example questions, it was suggested that you re-read whatever sentence(s) the question references. It can be difficult to answer questions about the meaning of a specific word/phrase if you’re trying to go straight from memory. Taking 20 seconds to re-read the referenced sentence will help increase your accuracy.

Of course, you still need to spend your time wisely. Don’t re-read the entire passage to figure out tone, or the form of the passage (e.g. is it a monologue). Instead, make quick notes while reading the passage through the first time.

Now that you know what to study, we can discuss what to do when you’re actually sitting down for the exam. See below for some useful tips.

## **Test-Taking Tips**

### **Test-Taking Tips for the AP English Language Multiple-Choice Section**

Next, let’s go over some useful tips on what to do when you’re actually taking the multiple-choice section of the exam. As we’ve discussed, the focus of the AP

English Language and Composition exam is to test your ability to evaluate rhetoric. Working within the framework of this knowledge will help you save time on the exam. The below tips will help you understand the given passage better the first time reading it through:

### ***Read through the passage before tackling the questions***

Reading the passage first will help you build a basic understanding of the work before answering the questions. Some people suggest reading the questions first so you know what to focus on when you're reading the passage. This is also a plausible method, but it may encourage you to ignore other contextual details in the prose. You can try both, and see what works better for you.

### ***Make quick notes on the page***

You should annotate as you read because this helps reduce the time you spend going back to the passage when you're answering the questions. Jot down quick notes on the following:

- The speaker's tone and the speaker's attitude towards the subject matter
- Noticeable literary choices, including figures of speech (e.g. use of polysyndeton)
- The form of the passage (e.g. monologue, fable etc.)

### ***Focus on the speaker***

The multiple-choice section often asks you to evaluate the speaker(s)' tone, attitude, motivation, word-choice and/or meaning. As you read, try to understand the meaning of the passage from the speaker's point-of-view. Here is an example of a question about a passage's speaker that may appear on the exam:

#### Example: Evaluating the speaker

The speaker in the passage can best be described as a person who

1. Is committed to developing his skills as a writer
2. Is actually more interested in being a musician than in being a writer
3. Has talent as both a musician and a writer
4. Is motivated very differently from the jazz musicians that he describes
5. Aspires to greatness but knows that he will never achieve it

### ***Underline obvious figures of speech***

If you notice a metaphor, simile etc. when you're reading through the piece, then underline it because you will most likely encounter a question on it. Taking note of it early reduces the time you spend evaluating the question or the piece itself.

### ***Circle words you don't know***

If you happen to come across a word you don't understand while reading, encircle it. If there is a question about the meaning of the word, use context clues in the surrounding sentences to make an intelligent guess.

### ***Use the process of elimination***

There is no penalty for guessing, but an educated guess is better than choosing at random. Let's walk through the steps of process of elimination together:

- Cross out answers that don't seem plausible (i.e. what you *know* is wrong)
- Encircle potentially accurate answers
- Scrutinize between potential answers by using your previous knowledge or context clues
- Make your best guess

### ***Take practice tests online***

You don't want to be surprised when you sit down for the actual exam. Get familiar with the structure and patterns of the exam. This will help boost your confidence! A quick Google search will help you gain access to free online practice exams. You can also find sample questions [here](#) and [here](#).

The multiple-choice section is only challenging if you go in unprepared. However, don't freak out if you come across a figure of speech or a vocabulary word you don't know. Just try to use the context clues offered in the question itself and within the piece to help you figure out the meaning of the word or term. Skip the question if necessary. Again, there are no penalties for guessing. You are awarded points for the questions you answer correctly.

## **Key Takeaways**

We've covered quite a few strategies you can use to tackle AP English Language multiple-choice questions. Here are the key lessons from this review:

- Pay attention to word choice and descriptions—you may be asked to interpret the effect of a specific phrase
- Note the speaker's tone/the tone of the overall passage
- Encircle or underline figures of speech or other literary terms you notice your first time reading through the passage
- Understand the key aspects of sentence structure (e.g. word modification)
- Note the composition/format of the passage (e.g. is it a monologue, fable etc.)

# How to Tackle the Synthesis Essay

## General Overview

Much like the (in)famous DBQ on AP History tests, the AP English Language Synthesis essay requires you to incorporate the broad range of skills that you have honed over the course of your liberal arts classes: reading comprehension, the ability to analyze multiple sources of information (including visuals and graphics), and the skill to structure and convey your thoughts effectively.

To score high on the Synthesis essay, you must first be familiar with its format and understand exactly what the prompt is asking you to do. You must also understand how you will be scored -- what the readers look for, what you need to do, and what mistakes to avoid.

Every essay prompt will start with an introduction -- a few sentences that give you some background information on the topic. After you have familiarized yourself with the topic -- which you may or may not already know something about -- you will move on to the actual assignment, which will always ask you to *state and justify an opinion* using *at least three* of the six attached sources.

## Scoring Guidelines

Remember this, because this is the first place where students trip up on the Synthesis essay: *the College Board wants you to state your opinion*. Don't make the mistake of simply summarizing everything you know about the topic, and don't try to stay detached from the topic at hand. Give your opinion -- whether you agree fully or conditionally, whether you disagree completely or partially. The College Board does not care what your opinion actually is -- you don't lose points for challenging the central assumption of the prompt -- but the graders DO care if you can justify that opinion intelligently, coherently, and cohesively.

In other words, the College Board wants to see you write *effectively*. This is the #1 buzzword in all College Board documents; students who score an 8 or a 9 are rated as "effective," whereas students who score a 6 or a 7 are considered "adequate." (5s are generally "limited," "uneven," or "inconsistent," according to the College Board. 3s and 4s are "inadequate," 1s and 2s have "little success," and 0s are completely off-topic.) Understanding the scoring criteria is extremely

important because it will help you to evaluate yourself, both when practicing and when taking the actual test.

The question then becomes, what makes an “effective” piece of writing?

The answer is simple:

In your answer, you must demonstrate that *you know what to do*. This means:

1. Responding to every part of the question in a well-developed thesis statement.
2. Forming an opinion of your own based in evidence and textual support.
3. Synthesizing at least three of the six attached sources.
4. Writing clearly, grammatically, and adeptly.

That’s it. Those are the four elements that go into effective writing -- and into scoring an 8 or a 9. It sounds simple, but there’s a lot that goes into this kind of writing, so keep reading for a better understanding of how to accomplish these four goals.

## Understanding the Prompt

In order to achieve both #1 -- responding to every part of the question in a well-developed thesis statement -- and #2 -- forming an opinion of your own based in evidence and textual support -- you must actually *understand what the question is asking*. Just as importantly, you must be able to demonstrate that you understand how the attached sources are relevant to the prompt.

You will have fifteen minutes to read the prompt and the attached sources. Use this time wisely. Pick apart the sources carefully to ensure that you understand their meaning. Annotate them in whatever way is most meaningful to you. Summarize their main points in a sentence or two so that you can quickly refer back to your notes when constructing your well-supported thesis.

Reading the sources carefully is a crucial part of understanding the prompt and constructing the thesis, and performing an in-depth analysis of the sources before you actually start writing will save you time in the long run. With that work done, you’ll have much of the support for your argument in place even before you begin writing.

## Constructing the Thesis

Perhaps you were lucky enough to have a familiarity with the prompt. If this is the case, you may have already had a thesis in mind after reading the question -- perhaps a knee-jerk response to the question that you felt instinctively was correct.

But now that you have read the sources and considered carefully where every single one can fit in, you'll want to revisit that original thesis. Remember, a thesis is a central claim or argument that you spend the rest of the essay developing and supporting.

Remember, you have to respond to the prompt in some way. Do you agree? Disagree? Partially agree? Want to challenge? Defend? Modify the question in some way? This is where you state that opinion. And remember, you need a thesis that you can argue for convincingly and support using the attached sources. When crafting the thesis, remember always that you should be *doing something*, whether it's agreeing, disagreeing, challenging, defending, modifying, or anything else.

In order to ensure that you have constructed the most effective thesis possible, think about the following questions:

1. What do these sources DO for the thesis? Meaning, how can I use these sources to help provide evidence for the thesis I have come up with?
2. Which of these sources wholeheartedly supports my position?
3. Which of these sources is only partially helpful?
4. Which of these sources is not helpful at all but can be used as a straw man / counterargument?

In essence, you must use the sources you are given to carefully build an argument, considering where every source will fit in. It is perfectly fine -- in fact, it is encouraged -- to pick sources apart, demonstrating a clear understanding of *every* part of the argument that each source is making.

## Synthesizing Sources

For example, if half the argument fits perfectly with the thesis that you have constructed, but the other half doesn't, feel free to make note of this. One of the main skills that the College Board emphasizes is the ability to "bring sources into

conversation with one another.” (Also known as “synthesis.”) This means that you must understand, on a deep level, every part of every source, so that you can decide what works for your thesis, what doesn’t, and how the sources fit together and work with each other.

You may end up with a thought that looks like this:

“Source B begins promisingly, but the latter half of the article devolves; to maintain the integrity of my argument, I would jettison the latter half of this source for the following reason...”

Or “Source A is a clever but misleading analysis that gets away from the larger point at hand...”

Or “Source D does an excellent job of laying out the following principles, which makes it an excellent proof for the argument that...”

Any and all of those thoughts are not only valid but encouraged; the College Board is explicitly testing your ability to understand and engage with sources on a deeper level. Using qualifying statements demonstrates not only that you understand every source well, but that you have a thorough understanding of how to USE the source -- which parts of it can be retained and which parts should be discarded, and why.

This is a prime example of analysis -- breaking something down to its component parts and ensuring that you not only understand those component parts but that you can use all of them effectively. Without first understanding those component parts -- those bits and pieces that make up an argument -- you will not be able to fuse them effectively, and will end up with jagged edges or with an incomplete or unconvincing argument. Therefore it is crucial to *analyze before you synthesize*.

“But aren’t analysis and synthesis opposites?” you may be asking. Technically, yes -- analysis means “taking something apart” while synthesis means “putting something together.” But think of it this way -- you are taking apart sources in order to make something new. Synthesis is the art of fusing and melding disparate parts to create a unified and coherent whole. *This* is the skill that the College Board is assessing by giving you this essay prompt.

## Arguing Your Point

More important than the position you take is the method by which you strengthen your argument. You *must* cite convincing evidence, utilizing at least three of the given sources. Since you have already come up with a thesis and conducted a thorough analysis of the necessary sources, this is where you will figure out how they all fit together -- how you will use the sources that you have annotated to provide evidence for every part of your thesis statement.

Some how-to guides will suggest that you first create an outline once you have come up with your thesis and analyzed your sources, but before you begin writing. This is a strategy that works well for some people and works less well for others. You know yourself best, so if you know that you will spend too much time on the outline and not enough on actually crafting the essay, skip this step. (This is why it helps to practice repeatedly before you actually take the AP -- simulating test conditions will give you a much better idea of how you write under pressure.) However, whether you create an outline or just spend some time annotating how you will use each source, make sure you have a clear understanding of how each source fits into your thesis. This, after all, is one of the four important skills that the College Board is looking to assess.

## Crafting Your Essay

You have read the prompt and you understand it. You have analyzed sources, crafted a thesis, and determined where each source will fit into your thesis. Now you are able to begin writing.

Though the AP graders will assess your mastery of standard written conventions, they also understand that you have an hour to craft this well-structured and well-considered essay. They are not expecting a masterpiece, so don't worry too much about polishing every single word. Instead, focus on how you will fit every part of your argument together so it's like a well-oiled machine, each part of the argument interlocking with the other to create something unified and cohesive.

The first thing to consider is structure. Every well-written and effective synthesis essay begins with a contextualization of the prompt -- you must introduce the ideas and give them a background, a context, locate them within a larger understanding of the issue. This would be an appropriate place to draw upon your own personal knowledge (providing, of course, that it is accurate). This

introduction is crucial as it will help locate the issue for your reader, providing a smooth and easy to understand introduction to the issue at hand.

In middle and high school, your English teacher may have referred to this contextualization as the “hook” -- the catchy opening that ensnares the reader from the very beginning. But don’t worry too much about making this opening “snazzy;” this is a surefire way to waste time. It’s much more important to present a complete and well-argued essay than a partially finished work with a great opening.

At this point, you can insert your thesis. You’ve already spent time crafting it and ensuring that it performs some kind of action -- a defense, a challenge, a modification, etc. Now is the time to insert it into your essay and tackle the evidence.

Unlike traditional five-paragraph-essays of the past, synthesis essays do *not* need to follow a specific, pre-ordained order. Since the goal is to bring all sources “in conversation” with one another and incorporate multiple sources, you can think conceptually and involve multiple sources in one paragraph.

Think conceptually, not in terms of sources; you don’t need to give each source one paragraph because it seems more “organized;” instead, think about the concept that each source aims to tackle or deconstruct. When you think conceptually and dedicate a paragraph (or several) to each part of a *concept*, rather than each discrete source, you will have a much easier time integrating and synthesizing your sources.

This is where your annotations will have come in handy -- if you’ve annotated your sources, then you will have a good idea of what concept each source relates to. Since multiple sources can all touch on the same topic in different ways, this is a perfect way to synthesize the various sources and bring them in conversation with one another. You can comment on how Source B and Source C focus on the same issue, but point out that Source B takes a negative approach while Source C is more moderate. Or you can take note of the fact that Source D and Source F take radically different approaches to the same idea, and comment on which you find more convincing, and why. It isn’t disorganized to integrate multiple sources into one paragraph based on similar concepts; it’s conversation. It’s synthesis.

## A Word about Structure

When you're crafting an essay using a conceptual model, it can be difficult to remain organized, since you'll no longer have the old easy model of "one source per paragraph." Since the essay is now organized conceptually, introduce your concepts the way you would introduce your sources in a traditional five-paragraph-essay. The easiest way to do this is to use transition words that indicate a shift from one thought to another, or a continuation of a thought. Words like "However," "Moreover," "Additionally," "Regardless of," and so forth will help you to transition between thoughts effectively and ensure that you are remaining organized even as your sources are in "conversation."

If it helps, think of the Synthesis essay as one very long Tumblr post, with each source "talking" to the other and commenting on the same material in a thread that is organized and easy to read.

Writing a well-structured essay that utilizes transition words will also be sure to impress the AP readers who are assessing your essay for its use of standard written English conventions. In the heat of writing, it can be easy to just throw anything down on paper without thinking about it, but utilizing transition words will also remind you to introduce an element of organization and structure, particularly a final or concluding paragraph that will demonstrate that you have tied all of your thoughts together and that no loose threads remain.

## Key Takeaways

Writing a synthesis essay is a tall order that involves much reading, careful analysis, annotation, and a good bit of structure and craft. It is a tall order, especially as much of the advice involves "ensuring that all sources are in conversation" -- a tall and somewhat confusing order. As always, the best way to ensure success is to practice, practice, practice. Use the prompts that your teacher gives you in class. Practice at home on your own. This essay, though it uses many skills you already have, is one of the hardest since it requires college-level thinking and writing, which you may not have practiced in the classroom before. But with practice, success is more than possible -- it is well within your reach.

To ensure that you do well on test day, don't forget these key takeaways:

1. *Always cite your sources.* Allude to them however you want -- "As Source A says," "In the graph in Source D," "As evidenced by the image in Source

- C,” “As So-and-so says in Source F,” -- but if you do not explicitly reference your sources, or acknowledge that the data comes from a place other than your own brain, you are committing plagiarism. Not only is this a serious ethical offense, but you will also lost significant points for an error of this magnitude. Save yourself the points -- cite your sources.
2. *Forget the traditional essay.* The five-paragraph-essay is a wonderful organizational tool in many contexts; the AP English Language exam is not one of them, as it discusses sources in isolation without making them a larger part of the conversation. So instead of focusing on having each source constitute a paragraph, think conceptually. You'll have a much easier time with synthesis.
  3. *Engage with the sources.* Many students simply cite the source without engaging it. For example, if you say something along the lines of “The data in Chart A proves my point,” and leave it at that, you're missing the larger point -- what you actually want to do is use the data in Chart A and make some sort of POINT about it -- compare it to the statement in Article D! Contrast it to Image C! Point out that if it were ever so slightly modified it would help further your argument even more. In other words, make sure that you do more than just summarize the sources -- you want to ensure that they are always in dialogue with each other as well as with the larger point of your essay as a whole. Simply giving a summary is not an adequate way to address the task of synthesis. Instead, you want to strive to ensure that every single source that you choose to bolster your evidence has some bearing on the larger picture.

If you do all of these things, you will be sure to see success on test day. But don't just take our word for it -- practice here with these prompts, and be sure to time yourself for an accurate picture of how well you write (and synthesize!) under pressure. Good luck!

# How to Tackle the Rhetorical Analysis Essay

## General Overview

The rhetorical analysis essay on the AP English Language exam requires you to put into practice all of the principles you have learned over the course of the year.

The essay demands that you analyze a given piece of writing for the efficacy of its rhetorical strategies. In essence, this is an extension of the multiple choice questions that asked you to demonstrate understanding of rhetorical strategies. If you have studied for AP English Language and have a working familiarity with rhetorical strategies, organizing this essay should be your moment of triumph.

## Preparing for the Moment of Triumph, Part 1: Understanding the Prompt

To write a successful rhetorical analysis essay, you must first understand what the prompt is asking you to *do*. The prompt will always include a passage and ask you to write a well developed essay analyzing the efficacy of the rhetorical strategies that the author uses, supporting your analysis with “specific references to the text.”

In other words, you’re being asked to deconstruct not only *what* the author is saying but *how* s/he is saying it.

## Preparing for the Moment of Triumph, Part 2: Factors to Consider, and a Helpful Acronym

“Analyzing rhetorical strategies” is a big and amorphous task. This is where your AP English Language training comes in -- where you consider tone, vocabulary, syntax and diction, rhetorical modes, structure, forms of reasoning.

Ask yourself: What appeals are the author using? Is this a coldly rational argument that utilizes logic? (Logos?) An emotional appeal that relies on an emotional response? (Pathos?) Or is the author establishing his or her own credibility -- assuring the reader that s/he is legitimate and worth listening to? (Ethos?)

These Greek words refer to strategies that the author uses to craft an argument, and again, they can be determined by the tone of his or her text. Is s/he establishing credibility, marshalling a list of impressive credentials so that you will be more likely to believe what s/he is saying?

As with purpose, there is a certain fungibility to these designations. A text does not have to be flatly categorized as utilizing one of these three types of argument; it can again use a combination of these strategies. But assessing HOW these strategies are used and HOW the arguments are created is an essential part of analyzing an author's argument.

But these are strategies -- ways to help shape an argument. They do not necessarily have anything to do with structure. Think of them as skin, and the structure of an argument like bones -- the structure is what lies beneath, whereas the strategies are more of a "surface" feature of the craft. (For more on structure, skip ahead.)

Is the passage structured in a compare-and-contrast format? A narrative? An argument utilizing deductive reasoning? A practical argument ending with a call to action? Does the author use heavy description to get a point across?

You'll have forty minutes to complete this task, so you'll have to use your time wisely. If you are a nervous test-taker who gets intimidated by timed tests, and you're concerned about your ability to remember all rhetorical strategies, start with this acronym:

**S**  
**O**  
**A**  
**P**  
**S**  
  
**T**  
**O**  
**N**  
**E**

This acronym will give you a good place to start when it comes to rhetorical analysis. It doesn't contain every single rhetorical strategy, function, or mode, but it is the first step in remembering the basics. Additionally, the number of

rhetorical strategies used in a passage varies on the passage itself; the AP Readers do not in any way expect you to analyze every single rhetorical strategy that exists. It's much better to analyze two or three concepts in depth, using concrete examples and references from the text, than to give a hasty and ill-considered analysis of multiple strategies. SOAPS is an acronym for general features found in all rhetorical texts, which makes it a great place to start.

First, that S, or “speaker.”

Your analysis should touch on the following questions:

Who is the speaker? Does s/he introduce him or herself? If so, how does s/he refer to him/herself?

Understanding who the speaker *is* may better help you to understand what the speaker is trying to *do*, and how s/he is trying to do it.

Check out [this question](#) for more about the speaker -- this speech will give you a good indication of how having a speaker describe him/herself can be immensely helpful to your analysis of the text.

Next, consider “O,” or the occasion.

Does the author give you any indication as to the occasion of the piece -- i.e., why it was written? First, understanding WHY a piece was written will help you greatly in determining how the author constructs an argument and whether that argument is effective.

For example, a State of the Union Address and an informal email between colleagues may hit on several of the same points -- the importance of education initiatives or tax reforms -- but the way in which the arguments are structured will differ greatly depending on the occasion.

The A, or audience, will greatly influence the structure of the argument as well. Again, the State of the Union address has an audience of millions, and as such is structured to be both reassuring and persuasive. It is rich with imagery that assures Americans that they are unique as a nation, that they are secure, and that their concerns will be addressed.

Considering the “A,” or audience, means considering the context (as discussed in the topic outline on Author’s Meaning.) After all, there is a certain tacit contract

between the writer and the audience -- in an informal work email, the silent contract probably entails a certain level of professionalism, as well as an agreement that only specific topics will be discussed while others will remain outside of the workspace.

Understanding to *whom* a piece is addressed -- if to anyone -- will help you to investigate that “silent contract” and write knowledgeably about how an argument is structured and why an author chose a specific mode or strategy for writing the piece.

Finally, the “P” will help you to ascertain purpose -- in other words, WHY the argument was written.

This is similar to but distinct from the concept of the occasion. Where the occasion implies a certain *time* or *event* -- a celebration, a funeral, a protest -- the purpose matches the *reaction* to that event.

For example, the *occasion* of a bridesmaid’s toast may be a wedding, while the *purpose* of her toast is to celebrate the bride and groom. The occasion may be a funeral, but the purpose of the speech is to eulogize the departed. And the occasion may be a dispute with a neighbor over his unruly lawn, but the purpose of the nasty letter you write him is to threaten or castigate.

Thus, determining these factors -- as well as understanding how they are linked -- will help you to understand *what* the author is trying to do, *how* the author is trying to do it, and *whether* s/he is successful.

The “Purpose” of a piece can be broken down into three broad, general categories:

### **Persuade**

### **Inform**

### **Entertain**

Within these three broad designations lie a multitude of subtler purposes -- for example, a letter entreating King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to fund a boat trip ‘round the world would fall under the broad category of “persuasion,” but then so does an impassioned speech about nuclear disarmament. These two pieces of writing are -- in tone, in audience, in structure -- necessarily extremely

different, yet both are technically persuasive. So while it can be helpful to think about texts as having any of these three designations, there is certainly room to dig deeper and truly investigate more deeply, intricately, and critically when considering the purpose of the text.

Additionally, remember that rhetorical texts -- particularly well-crafted ones -- can have multiple purposes; a college essay, for example, can be said to inform (it is telling the admissions committee something they need to know), to entertain (a good college essay tries hard not to bore a jaded admissions committee to death), and to persuade (the admissions committee to grant you admission to their university.)

So while it can certainly be helpful to think about purpose, be nuanced in your analysis. Understand HOW (and if) the author both conveys and achieves his or her purpose.

The second “S” in SOAPSTONE asks you to consider the *subject* of the work -- i.e. what the work is actually about.

Understanding the subject is very helpful in deconstructing the author’s argument -- what is s/he trying to say and what is s/he trying to say it ABOUT? Again, is this an informal letter to a colleague? A passionate editorial about the importance of recycling? A newsy dispatch from a trip abroad? Ascertaining the subject will help you to craft an eloquent and well-defended argument around it. When writing the rhetorical analysis essay, you will have to consider and reference the subject repeatedly, so make sure that your references are doing the work you want them to do.

TONE: The last bit of the acronym.

Finally, when making your preliminary considerations, think about the *tone* of the piece. Does the author seem agitated? Dispassionate? Emotional?

How does the language used help to create a feeling in the piece? Are there angry words? Soothing ones? Is the overall message threatening? Argumentative? Purely logical? Considering the tone of the article will help you to understand how the argument is being crafted.

For more questions on tone, practice [here](#).

## **The Moment of Triumph, Part 3: Putting It All Together**

If you remember SOAPSTONE, you are already well on your way to writing an essay that effectively analyzes rhetorical strategies. But perhaps the most important thing to consider is that all of these factors are interrelated; it is impossible to consider one without the other.

After all, the tone is directly related to the audience, the purpose, and the occasion -- if you have picked your bridal party correctly, a wedding toast will likely have a happy, jocular, informal tone, as the audience is a crowd of family and friends, the purpose is to celebrate a couple's commitment to one another, and the occasion is, of course, a lasting union between two loving partners.

Similarly, the tone of the State of the Union address, which will likely be passionate, reassuring, and persuasive by turn, is directly related to the occasion (an annual communique to the American public), the audience (three hundred million Americans, roughly fifty percent of which did not vote for you), and the purpose (to reassure the American public that the government is acting in our best interests.)

So any nuanced analysis will explore the inter-relatedness of these factors and demonstrate a thorough understanding of the fact that each influences another.

However, this will not be the bulk of the essay, because none of these address the business of craft; they are preliminary considerations to address before you can more deeply analyze how the writer has structured his/her argument.

## **The Moment of Triumph, Part 4: A Word on Structure**

In your classroom, you may have learned about three major modes of argumentation: Classical, Rogerian, and Toulmin. We will return to these in just a moment, but before we do, it is worthwhile to present a conversation about structure in general, so that it becomes easier to analyze the structure of specific arguments.

Even if you do not know how to refer to these modes of argumentation or what they may entail, think about how structure can be said to "work." Think back to your middle school days, when your teacher impressed upon you the importance

of the five paragraph essay. Remember carefully crafting your “hook,” writing a thesis, and using the three body paragraphs to support your thesis? (And, to get particularly granular, remember how each sentence in each body paragraph had a specific function -- the topic sentence that introduced what you were going to say, the three sentences in between that helped support your topic sentence as well as your thesis, and the final sentence that helped sum it all up in a clever punchy way?)

Luckily, the five paragraph essay is probably a thing of the past -- not because it isn't an important way of writing, but because at this point in your academic career you are ready for bigger and more complex modes of argument. But the five-paragraph-essay is highly useful because it demands you to consider, on the most granular and intricate level, what structure should look like -- to consider that every single sentence needs to be doing some sort of “heavy lifting” in order to further your argument.

*This* is how you should begin thinking about structure. Is the author beginning with an introduction, or diving right in to the topic? (And what are the pros and cons of either approach?) Is the author laying out his or her argument in a linear fashion, with one point following logically from the next, or is s/he presenting a narrative to help convince you?

Is the evidence marshalled to defend the author's central claim of a personal nature? A logical one?

But before you can get conceptual with this question, get “nitty gritty.” Break this into tiny pieces -- sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph.

What is the first paragraph serving to *do*? (Introduce?)

The second? (Lay out a scenario? Defend a statement in the first paragraph? Introduce a new topic?)

How is the author *ending* the argument -- is s/he summing up her points neatly, or emphasizing a previous statement from the text? Does the author address alternative viewpoints? Give background information on the issue? Discuss related events or ideas?

In order to better assess the argument's structure, it may be helpful to consider the three main structures you are likely to learn about in an AP class:

- Classical
- Rogerian
- Toulmin

Here's a handy shortcut for you: if a rhetorical text was written before the 20th century, it is structured like a classical argument. This mode of argumentation, developed by Aristotle and Cicero, is over 2,000 years old, which means it still shapes contemporary methods of argumentation.

However, it is not enough to simply state "This is a classical argument" and be done with it. You must analyze *how* the structure of a classical argument builds and influences the tone, the strategies used, and the general effectiveness of the piece.

The "classical argument" has five parts:

1. The introduction, which "hooks" the reader (or listener) so that the audience has some incentive to actually listen.
2. The context or "narration," that gives the reader some background information on the issue at hand.
3. The "confirmation," or the place where you will find the thesis as well as all evidence that supports it.
4. The "concession and refutation," or where the author addresses any opposing viewpoints and knocks them down -- again, to convince his or her audience.
5. The conclusion, which can summarize or otherwise cap off the experience of reading and responding to the text.

You may notice that this argument has five parts, but be careful not to associate this too closely with the aforementioned traditional "five paragraph essay." There is no one-size-fits-all approach to a good argument; there are millions of texts that follow the structure of a classical argument and yet remain incredibly distinct from one another. This is because it is up to the author to decide *how* to implement these strategies, with what language, with what tone, and to what end.

However, it will be extremely helpful for you to be able to refer back to these modes of argumentation so that you can most effectively refer to the parts of an author's argument and speak knowledgeably about how they affect or create a certain mood, method, argument, or tone.

You may also run into texts that are structured in the Rogerian fashion. Developed by a psychologist, this mode of argumentation was intended to be a “non-confrontational” alternative to the classical mode, though it still retains elements of the classical method. In this mode of argumentation, the writer:

1. Introduces the issue at hand.
2. Illustrates contexts where other points of view on this issue might be valid.
3. States a position of their own, and reflects on the circumstances in which these positions may be true or valid (which clearly acknowledges that there are multiple perspectives, and not necessarily one objective truth)
4. Explains why it would be beneficial to adopt the position outlined above.

As you can see, it is not so much that the Rogerian argument differs in structure - - though there are some significant distinctions -- but in *purpose*. Where a classical argument seeks to be as effective as possible in presenting one overarching (one might say monolithic) idea, the Rogerian argument places an author’s position in the context of multiple, equally valid positions. If an argument is structured in the Rogerian style, it is unlikely to be harsh or angry in tone, and the subject matter is likely to be something about which the author can appreciate multiple viewpoints. Note that the structure discusses alternate positions *before* laying out the author’s opinion, giving respect to those differing perspectives. This is one significant difference from the classical mode, and you could write a particularly effective Rhetorical Analysis essay if you can mention these differing modes of argumentation and speak knowledgeably about how and why they are different and whether these methods suit the varying purposes of certain texts.

The final mode of argument is the Toulmin argument, developed by a philosopher. His method mandates that each argument have:

1. A claim. Roughly equivalent to a thesis in a traditional five paragraph essay, this is where the author presents a point of view that s/he plans to defend in the pursuant paragraphs.
2. Evidence. Toulmin makes no qualifications about the types of evidence that an author should present -- whether personal anecdotes or experiences, references to experts or statistics, or simply a demonstration of logical thought -- but he is firm on the fact that every argument needs some form of evidence to be convincing.

3. Warrant. The warrant links the claim and the evidence and lays out why the evidence is important in supporting the claim. It allows the writer to justify the reason for his or her belief in the general principle outlined in the claim by referring back to a specific piece of evidence.
4. Qualifiers. These qualifiers place limits on claims -- i.e. they present instances or reasons why claims might not be true or valid, so that the reader does not apply these claims to all cases, or rather, so that the reader is clear on the fact that these particular claims can only be true or well-supported in certain circumstances.
5. Conditions of rebuttal. This is where the writer addresses any alternate perspectives.

You may notice that none of these factors of a successful argument are given a “home” -- i.e. Toulmin makes no claims about where these different parts of the argument should go -- whether evidence should be placed in the third paragraph or the claim in the first. Obviously, there are limits to this free-form structure -- claim must precede evidence, or the essay will make little sense -- but there are few hard and fast rules about organization. Rather, this is a general guideline for the elements of an effective argument rather than a manual on where each element should go.

You may also notice that there is little attention given to rhetorical or linguistic structure -- to building blocks like introductions, conclusions, transitions, and the like. Like the Rogerian argument, this simply provides a series of general guidelines that are important to include in a given work so that writers feel comfortable knowing that they are creating an argument that addresses or fulfills specific conditions.

Again, as with the classical and the Rogerian argument, it is important and impressive to be able to discuss the varying modes of argumentation with confidence and panache, while remembering that these are general underlying principles, and not necessarily a plenary list of requirements to create a good argument. Remember that the structure of an argument is only part of the story; the other part includes making sure that a piece of writing is interesting, vibrant, persuasive, well-organized.

## The Actual Writing

Regardless of what you choose to focus on -- whether you perform a nitty-gritty analysis of diction and syntax or just focus on the mode that the author utilizes -- you need to ensure that your analysis is thorough and well-structured.

This means that you must include some sort of claim/central assertion/thesis statement that cogently summarizes the points you will be making in the essay, and you must *back up* those assertions with direct evidence from the text.

Like anything else, good writing takes practice. A deep familiarity with structures of argument, rhetorical modes, and appeals is useless if you can't structure your thoughts in a coherent and well-organized way, and if you can't properly cite evidence from the text.

So make sure you practice writing a rhetorical analysis essay at least two or three times before the test. This will guarantee that you use your forty minutes to thoroughly understand the prompt and the passage, to come up with an excellent thesis, and to write a well-structured essay peppered with references to the text.

## Key Takeaways

There is no one way for a piece of writing to be “effective” -- persuasive, well-organized, well-written, effective at fulfilling its purpose.

Structure and tone depend on audience, on purpose, on the subject. But if you are able to recognize and speak knowledgeably and critically about the different elements of an argument -- the claim, the evidence, the conclusion, the warrant, the qualifier, the audience, the purpose, the occasion, and perhaps most importantly the tone - you will be well on your way to scoring an 8 or a 9 on your Rhetorical Analysis essay, especially if you remember these key tips:

1. Consider SOAPSTONE -- Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, and Tone. Use these factors to drive your analysis.
2. Consider structure -- what kind of argument is the speaker using? What kind of modes and strategies? Can you classify these explicitly (thereby impressing the readers?)
3. Practice, practice, practice. Write constantly, and strive to include direct and explicit references to the text in your writing.

If you are comfortable with these three strategies, you'll achieve success on the AP English Language Rhetorical Analysis essay.

# How to Tackle the Argumentative Essay

## General Overview

If the rhetorical analysis essay asked you to analyze how another author structures his or her argument, then the argument prompt requires you to structure your own argument effectively, by using a variety of strategies.

You may be tempted to think of the argument prompt as the easiest one; after all, in the course of your daily life, you no doubt make multiple and well-structured arguments for a variety of purposes -- debating the relative merits of a certain film with your friends, arguing a point in class, convincing your little brother to do your chores for you, and so forth. But expressing an opinion verbally and structuring an argument on paper are two very different things; on the one hand, both require you to hold, clearly state, and back up an opinion. However, structuring an argument on paper requires more thought than delivering an impassioned speech *en extempore*.

This outline will take you through the steps necessary to score high (8-9) on the argumentative essay. As with all essays, the first thing to remember is how you are scored.

## Scoring

Essays that score an 8-9 argue effectively. This means that they take a position that answers the question, and back it up with evidence. The evidence and the explanations used are, in the words of the College Board, “appropriate and convincing,” and therefore effective.

But how to ensure that your argument is effective, and that your evidence and explanations “appropriate and convincing”? In order to write this essay well, you must first understand what you are being asked.

## Step One: Read the Prompt

The first thing to consider is the prompt. What is it asking you? And, more importantly, what position can you best and most effectively defend? Chances

are, the prompt will ask you about a topic you may not have considered before -- the changing nature of the self, for example, or how unspoken rules define our identity. Whatever it is, you must argue a position.

You may not have an immediate opinion on this matter. That's okay. The most important thing to remember is that this isn't a test of what your opinion *is*, but how well you can defend a stated position. It is often the case that you hold an opinion for emotional reasons, but when the time comes to defend that opinion logically, can muster little more than "but this is just how I feel." And while this does not make your opinion in any way invalid, it does present a certain difficulty for your audience, because an argument that relies on subjective opinion is a weak and unconvincing argument. (Unless, of course, you make a particularly effective appeal to the reader's emotions; however, this is a strategy to pull out in real-life contexts, not on the AP English Language and Composition exam, as it is unlikely to sway your readers.)

So with that said, remember this:

*It does not matter what your actual opinion is.* It only matters that you have at least three (if not more) pieces of evidence to defend a position on a certain topic.

## **Step Two: Pick A Side**

Once you have read the prompt, establish a position. The College Board will not penalize you for either agreeing or disagreeing with the prompt, so you should feel free to argue and declaim as passionately as you like. Many prompts will not actually have a side to defend -- they may be more general and open-ended than "do you agree or disagree with this, and why?" But either way, you will have to establish an opinion on the matter.

Before you even begin writing, sketch out your position (i.e. the bones of what will become your thesis statement.) Then jot down at least three pieces of evidence that you can use to shape your argument. If you cannot outline three pieces of evidence, you do not have an argument and you should pick an alternate viewpoint to defend.

Once you have come up with an opinion on the topic as well as outlined your evidence, write your thesis. Do this *before* crafting a catchy introduction, for two reasons:

1. You have time limits, and for many writers, getting started is the hardest part. You don't want to waste your time thinking about how to "hook" your readers with an effective and catchy intro. Later on you can think of a really punchy opening – and, worst-case-scenario, if you don't, at least you will have something concrete to fall back on.
2. You want to make sure that the most important element of your essay – the one that every single mode of argumentation requires, i.e. the thesis – is present on your page. You may not have thought about how to effectively structure your argument yet – whether you want to utilize a classical mode of argumentation or a Rogerian mode or the Toulmin model or some kind of hybrid. But all modes of argumentation have one thing in common: they require a thesis (or central claim) and evidence to support it. Once you have this, you have the bones of your essay.

### **Step Three: Choosing a Mode**

At this point, you may feel comfortable choosing a particular mode of argument – a classical model, a Toulmin model, etc. Often, when students are under time limits, they simply write what comes to their heads and fix the structure at the end if they have time. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to writing, so if you know that you are the sort of writer who likes to get your thoughts out first and shape them later, then go with that approach (particularly if you read and write quickly). But if you are the second kind of writer, who likes to come in with a plan and considers every sentence before writing, then planning out what type of rhetorical model you would like to assume is the best strategy for you.

At this point, you have a thesis and some evidence for it. Consider the evidence – is it mostly *personal* or *narrative*? A Toulmin approach is probably not your best bet – and in fact, unless your personal/narrative evidence is really, really special, you want to consider incorporating evidence that you can verify independently – a historical event, a literary work, a statistic, a commonly known fact. Always in these essays, you want to give your audience a wide selection of evidence, which not only demonstrates that you have the ability to synthesize evidence from multiple sources, but also proves you to be intellectually well-rounded.

If in the course of compiling your evidence, you thought about multiple differing perspectives and consider them to be of equal or nearly equal validity, a Rogerian approach may be the best – in which you outline other opinions and address the

contexts in which they may be valid, before moving on to your central claim and demonstrating why it is valid in itself.

If there are conditions and qualifications to the evidence that you have compiled, a Toulmin approach may work for you, as this is a mode of argumentation that allows you to qualify or put limits on certain statements -- so if a piece of evidence doesn't work all the way through, or in every instance, address it! This is a sophisticated tactic that demonstrates a mature consideration of all topics at hand.

With that said, if you are passionate about your statement and firm on your evidence – particularly if you are dying for a chance to knock down alternate viewpoints, the classical argument may be the best approach, as it will allow you to not only air your own viewpoint but to consider alternatives and refute them with as much vim as you wish.

Unlike the classical or Rogerian arguments, the Toulmin model does not say much about structure—about what should come first and where evidence should go or what to put in your conclusion (or whether you should even have a conclusion.) So if you choose this approach, make sure you are organized and consistent – that your claim precedes your evidence, your qualifiers are placed where they will make the most sense (i.e. the qualifier to Piece of Evidence 1 go directly after Piece of Evidence 1, even if that means that the evidence does not all flow in a linear fashion, the way it might in the traditional five paragraph essay. There is more than one way to organize a piece of writing, so if your organization is clearly well-considered (i.e. Qualifier 1 coming after Evidence 1, then Evidence 2, then Qualifier 2, and so forth) this will come across to the reader. Just make sure that you are maintaining a certain level of focus in your work, and that your argument makes sense.

## **Step Four: The Writing**

Once you have decided on a structure, it is time to begin writing. For those of you who choose the classical or Rogerian modes, you have a general template to help you structure your work; for those of you who went with a Toulmin approach, just be sure that you are also including effective transitions as well as leading with some form of “hook” or introduction so you are not simply launching into a claim and startling the reader.

Since this is a timed test and you are being assessed on your use of modes of argument – including structure, whether you have and can support a thesis, and persuasiveness – this is not the place to get hung up on lovingly crafting each word. There are no shortcuts to effective writing – once that clock begins ticking, you will likely not remember the importance of transition words or the best way to structure and express a certain sentiment unless this is something you have practiced many times before. So make sure that you try this exercise at least once (if not more!) before the test – to ensure that on test day, you are able to utilize effective writing techniques as well as strong argumentation and organizational skills.

A note on writing: Some writers like to read over their work paragraph by paragraph as they go and fix errors so that when they get to the end, they don't have a nasty, overwhelming task ahead of them.

Others prefer not to become distracted by their previous work until they have wrung out every last shred of evidence and expressed themselves as fully as possible; again, there is no one right way to write an effective argumentation essay. Either way, try to remember to leave yourself time to read over the essay at the very end to ensure that your work makes sense – that it conforms to some sort of logical structure, that you have sufficiently varied your sentence structure so that the reader isn't stuck with a staccato essay, that you have used language that is clear and precise but also vibrant and interesting, that your examples and evidence are fully fleshed out and given their due consideration.

## **Key Takeaways**

Writing an essay in forty minutes -- particularly one on a topic that you may not be familiar with -- is a difficult task. The AP Readers are looking for mastery of a lot of different elements, from constructing an intelligent and coherent thesis to furnishing context and -- most importantly -- evidence. Additionally, you want to make sure that your essays are structured well and intelligently. This is a lot to keep in mind, so it may be helpful to make yourself a checklist so you can effectively ensure that your essay contains the following elements:

An introduction of some sort (this can be where you hook a reader, where you furnish him or her with context and background information, where you present your claim -- what you do in your introduction simply depends on the form that your argument takes)

A thesis / central claim (non-negotiable)

At least three distinct pieces of evidence (non-negotiable) that are well-explained and vigorously defended, and clearly link back to your thesis statement in a way that helps support it

A place where you can qualify your own statements if necessary

A consideration of other perspectives -- either for the purpose of refuting them entirely or for the purpose of suggesting that there are some cases in which they may be valid

A conclusion that ties up your argument

If you did not choose a specific mode of argumentation while crafting your essay, you may be surprised to find that your essay contains elements of each -- both qualifying statements AND a refutation of other opinions, for example.

That is OK. The prompts will not ask you to argue a point using a specific style, so if you want to adopt and adapt various elements, that's fine. Just make sure that your essay remains tight and focused, and that you don't let the untraditional structure get away from the heart of the matter, which is proving to the AP Readers that you can come up with, structure, and defend an argument convincingly and with panache.

# How to Approach Author's Meaning

## AP English Language Questions

### General Overview

Ah, the eternal question: how to determine what an author actually *means*? If writing is a way of communicating, why do so many authors rely on oblique statements, metaphors and other figurative language, and abstract concepts to convey their meanings?

The texts you will encounter in AP English Language and Composition -- not to mention college, the workplace, and “the real world” -- will, overwhelmingly, be high-level non-fiction texts from a variety of genres and formats, written for a multitude of purposes, and published across time periods. Whether it’s a textbook, speech, editorial, work report, article, or the humor column of your local paper, all texts can be unlocked using the same four essential questions:

1. **What** is the author saying?
2. **To whom** is the author saying it?
3. **How** is the author saying it?
4. **Why** is the author saying it?

These four questions are the crux of “meaning.” In AP English Language -- and indeed, in all high-level text analysis -- meaning is not simply “what.” It is also “Who, where, when, why, and how?” Meaning isn’t a static concept, but a multidimensional idea, created both by the author, the audience, and the time period/social context in which the piece was written.

### “The What:” Words in Context

“Multidimensional meaning” can be a difficult idea to wrap your mind around, so consider

the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” A lovely sentiment, and yet one that makes little sense considering that as this document was being written, the economy of half of the United States was being built on the backs of slaves.

The words “all” and “men” had extremely different meanings then than they do now -- not because the *words* have changed, but because our *understanding* has. And though the document still says “men,” our understanding of the phrase -- and our country’s laws -- has evolved to include the other 50% of the population as well.

So meaning is variable, and dependent on the audience.

Want a more contemporary example? Consider a commercial for TV dinners. (Yes, advertisements are texts too, and worthy of critical analysis.)

Where one viewer might find the content to be inspiring -- busy families uniting for a good meal! -- another may find the exact same ad to be a cynical skill for an unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable lifestyle. Both viewers could use *the exact same evidence* to support their claims, and both viewers could, in certain contexts, be correct. It is all a matter of perception.

We use the word “meaning” as a synonym for “intention,” but it’s much richer than that. Author’s intention is just one piece of the puzzle. After all, in its most stripped-down form, the “authors” of the advertisement mentioned above intended to use this ad to make money (just as the authors of the Declaration of Independence claimed to want freedom for all... while holding a highly rigid and limited definition for the word “all.”)

But the creators of the advertisement also intended to remind viewers of their own fondly-remembered family dinners, to provide a convenient solution for stressed families, and perhaps even to promote an idealized portrait of the typical American family. Intentions have multiple layers that, in turn, help to create multiple meanings for readers to investigate and assess. And of course, the audience will engage with those layers of intention in different ways, depending on their own context and understanding.

Think you’ve got a handle on how purpose and intention create and influence meaning? Practice [here](#).

## “The Who:” Audience

Of course, author’s purpose becomes easier to parse when you ask yourself “who is this for?” If you know the intended audience, it is easier to analyze how the author conveys a message and meaning.

For example, if you know that the intended recipient of an advertisement for sports cars is the 18-34 year old male demographic, you can be more aware of how the advertisement purposely neglects to address women aged 18-34, or even how the advertisement utilizes sexist language and images to appeal to its demographic.

On a more erudite note, understanding the intended audience of Jonathan Edwards' famous "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon will help you to analyze just why its fire-and-brimstone rhetoric would have been effective (though such attitudes and sermons have since fallen out of style and would likely not be effective for the modern Christian).

Therefore, in order to be an effective reader -- in order to truly grasp at an author's meaning -- you need to read holistically, to look carefully at every element of a piece, including when, where, and by whom it was written, as this will help create your understanding of the audience.

Pay attention to small cues -- dates on letters, the style of address, references to historical events or cultural mores -- in order to assess when the piece was written. You do not need to be an expert in all eras of history in order to recognize that a political speech delivered in 1860 Virginia will carry very different import than a political speech delivered a hundred years later in the same location. To be an effective reader, you must be able to activate cross-disciplinary knowledge, particularly of history and social studies. So pay attention to small details, as they will help guide your understanding of a larger piece.

Want to practice how context and audience go hand in hand? Test your skills [here](#).

## **“The How:” Words, Words, Words**

At this point, you may be concerned by all of the layers that go into the construction of meaning, such as intention, social context, and audience interaction.

Don't be.

The idea that there are layers of intention as well as multiple and often equally valid modes of interpretation should be reassuring to you. Why? Because this means that as long as you can back your ideas up with direct evidence from the

text, regardless of what that text may be, your understanding of meaning is as valid as anyone else's.

Determining the “how” is arguably the most important bit of work you will do as a good critical reader, because this is where the bulk of your evidence lies.

After all, this question (“*How* is the author saying it?”) asks you to critically investigate, on a granular level, what effects particular words, sentences, paragraphs, structures, rhetorical and literary devices have on the meaning of the text as a whole.

If *all* you knew about Dr. King’s famous speech “I Have A Dream” was that it was written and delivered by a persecuted minority in 1960s America, you might assume that the tone would be angry, defiant, even seditious. This is where critical reading comes in -- where you actually look *carefully* at the way that the words are strung together and at the choice of language and structure.

Look, for example, at the first line of that famous speech:

“I am **happy** to join with you today in what will go down in history as the **greatest demonstration for freedom** in the history of our nation.”

Here, King is establishing goodwill -- he is presenting a positive face, even if what he has to say later may be hard for some Americans to hear. But he also clearly (and rightfully) recognizes and trumpets the importance of his own words and of the movement he came to symbolize. “The greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation” is a bold statement, indicating that King means business.

And indeed, look what he does in the very next sentence:

“**Five score years** ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.”

Here, King directly references President Lincoln, both by adopting Lincoln’s famous “four score and seven years ago” opener from the Gettysburg Address -- another of the great orations of history -- and by referring to him explicitly as “a great American.”

By utilizing the exact same language as Lincoln, King posits himself, in a sense, as Lincoln’s heir -- another great leader fighting for freedom. Note that he never

says “I am like Lincoln.” But his statement “in whose symbolic shadow we stand today” clearly links the contemporary struggle for civil rights with the past struggle for the freedom that Lincoln ostensibly “granted” all Americans. This is also a clever and tacit reminder to all those listening -- particularly those who may not like the message -- that there is significant historical precedent for the struggle for freedom as well as significant justification for demanding it.

King’s speech goes on, utilizing a variety of highly effective rhetoric. It is an excellent example of a high-level rhetorical text in which the author creates meaning using a variety of devices -- from engaging directly with the audience, to referencing respected and admired leaders, to reminding listeners of America’s past. All of these strategies are intended to create meaning for the listener and the reader -- to convey a message in a way that is both poignant, instructive, and galvanizing.

There is no clever shortcut here other than to pay close attention to what you are reading. Note the tone, the words used, and any important devices.

Want to practice a granular analysis of the “how”? Test your skills [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

## The “Why:” A Rationale

Think back to the previous example -- the famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

King’s speech should indeed be galvanizing. Consider its purpose: to rouse Americans to right the injustices committed against the African-American community for hundreds of years, and to establish a new and better world. Naturally, the “why” of a piece is inextricably linked with its “hows.”

In a previous article, we mentioned that “why,” or “purpose,” is much more complex than just “to inform,” “to persuade,” or to “entertain.” In the speech above, King is performing a masterful combination of the three. He is informing America of the long struggle that his people have had, as well as their impatience with the (terrible) status quo. He is persuading the American public that the treatment that African Americans have endured is not only unjust but unsustainable. And he is “entertaining” the audience -- not by making them laugh but by captivating them, keeping them spellbound with his emphatic, effective, and deeply poetic words. But his *purpose* isn’t any of these; it isn’t even this

trifecta of factors. Instead, his purpose is no more and no less than to change the world.

When considering an author's purpose, take the *whole* of what they are saying. As mentioned before, you must analyze words used (what), the devices employed (how), the historical background (who), the social context (who). Take into account *your* interpretation, what you believe the author is saying. Take into account your own reaction -- what feelings, opinions, and thoughts this text awakens in you.

If you read carefully and critically, then you become a member of the audience (perhaps not a member of the INTENDED audience, but a member just the same) and thus you have not only the right but the obligation to interact with the text and to assign it some form of meaning. As a member of the audience, you have the power to decide whether a certain linguistic or rhetorical choice is justified, whether it is appropriate, whether it is effective. You have the power to decide what the author means to say and how good a job s/he is doing. And as long as you can back up your assertions with direct evidence from the text -- e.g. "By directly referring to President Lincoln, Dr. King immediately justifies and legitimizes his claim" -- there is no claim or assertion that is too bold or controversial.

To practice "Why" questions, test your skills [here](#) or [here](#).

## Key Takeaways

Since meaning is created through an interrelated variety of factors, there is no one way and no standardized process for approaching questions about the author's meaning. But there are several strategies you can employ to help you understand an author's meaning.

1. Read widely. The wider the variety of texts you are exposed to, the easier it will be for you to recognize certain strategies and devices that authors employ to create meaning. There is no shortcut for this strategy, so start early, reading both what is assigned in class as well as work from outside the classroom. If you're not sure where to start, ask your teacher or librarian for guidance, or check out [AP Central's list of recommended reading](#).
2. Read carefully. Again, to determine meaning you must look at what is there -- how are the words and images on this page conveying a message?

Start with the basics. Identify *what* the piece is (which may help you ascertain its intention, and thus its efficacy). Is this a pamphlet? A speech? A diary entry? A letter? Who wrote it? When? To whom? Analyzing words and devices on a granular level will help drive your understanding and analysis of a piece.

3. Activate background knowledge. When considering a piece, think about this: What was going on in the world at that time? What was the status of women, minorities, political dissidents? Was this piece a reaction to something? A catalyst for something else? You may not be able to answer all of these questions. That's okay. But begin thinking about them. Make yourself a checklist. See if you can at the very least ascertain when a piece was written, and extrapolate from there; if you know only that a piece was written in France in 1941, you would be able to guess its general context even without knowing its content. Same with "USA, 1970." Same with Kigali, Rwanda, 1995. Coming in with at least a vague and general idea of a piece's history and context will help you to begin parsing its meaning.

Above all, the best takeaway is to enjoy the work. Soak in the wisdom of world-changing texts and use their strategies to drive your own high-level writing. And remember: meaning is multilayered and ever-changing, and your evidence-backed assertions are just as valid as anyone else's. You, the reader, have the power to decide what a piece means.

Want more practice? Check out Learnerator's trove of Author's Meaning questions [here](#).

# How to Approach Organization and Structure AP English Language Questions

## General Overview

If you survived eighth grade English, you've probably heard about "structure and organization" more times than you care to remember. But there's a reason your teachers have emphasized structure as much as they have.

In order to be effective, a piece of writing must be "structurally sound" -- much like a building, writing relies on the integrity of its underlying structure. If the structure isn't sound, the whole work collapses.

Imagine, for example, that this topic outline read as follows:

*Structure is very important. Here are some tips on structure. Bananas are delicious. So is cheese. Here are some ways to analyze structure.*

Clearly, this is an extreme example, yet it's highly relevant because it demonstrates that in order to be coherent and cohesive, a text must conform to a specific structure. It must be organized, clear, and focused -- easy to understand, yet not necessarily simplistic. This mini-passage makes no sense because there is no focus; one thought does not follow logically from the other, and no ideas are actually developed at all. There is no way you would take the above passage seriously if you were really looking for an essay on structure.

If writers began talking chasing their own stream-of-consciousness thoughts every time they felt like it, our official documents, books, texts, and other writings would make absolutely no sense. The world as we know it might grind to a complete halt.

Think this is an exaggeration? Check out [this Organization and Structure Overview question](#) and see if you understand what makes for effective and ineffective structure.

## One More Analogy

Think of a text's structure like a skeleton -- you don't spend a lot of time considering the bones underneath your skin, fat, and muscles, but without them, you'd be an amorphous blob. Like a skeleton, a good underlying structure gives shape, form, and purpose to a piece of writing without being obtrusive.

Really good structure means that everything flows, one paragraph into the next, without you having to think too much about it (again, the way you never think too much about the fact that without your skeleton, you wouldn't be able to Google "AP English Language Organization and Structure help.")

But just as with a physical skeleton, the structure of a piece of writing can be taken apart and analyzed, its component parts examined as you study how the piece functions.

We can parse structure down to its very minutest level -- syntax and sentences. We will touch on those, but primarily we will focus on the *building blocks* of good writing; the following topics are applicable whether you are writing your own work or reading someone else's.

## The Nitty Gritty

As discussed in other sections, syntax and diction are essential in constructing meaning. Syntax, or sentence structure, can help to create or influence the structure of a larger work -- not just because syntax determines whether a piece is grammatical or not, but because it contributes to how the passage is written and organized.

For example, if your syntax relies solely on short declarative sentences, your structure will necessarily be short, declarative, and compressed. If your sentences tend to be long and flowery, there's a good chance that your structure will be a bit more digressive. How you structure sentences, at the minutest level, tends to influence how you structure the actual passage itself. When writing your own essays, try to vary your sentence structure so the text is easier and more interesting to read; a constant barrage of very short sentences can be extremely off-putting and almost militaristic, whereas an endless list of extremely long sentences can be difficult to understand.

Want to practice your understanding of syntax? Check out [this question](#).

## How Structure Is Created, or The Hard-Working Paragraph

Unlike poetry and experimental literature, the texts you read for AP English Language class will be organized by paragraphs. They may not all contain topic sentences and thesis statements -- the way that you may have learned in middle school -- but every paragraph will have a specific function and purpose in the text.

Determining the type of text here is crucial, as a speech will be organized and structured differently than a pamphlet and an editorial will be structured differently from a piece of travel writing.

So first determine what your piece is -- what information it is trying to impart and how it tries to do so. This will help you to figure out its structure and what each paragraph is trying to do, which in turn will help you to determine and analyze its structure. (Going back to the skeleton analogy, this is where you try to determine whether you are looking at the skeleton of a T.Rex or a velociraptor -- in order to perform any sort of legitimate analysis, you need to know the difference between the two!)

Say you are analyzing a political speech. Understanding the *purpose* of this speech will make it much easier to analyze its structure, as you'll know what the speech is trying to do and how it is attempting to do it.

For example, a speech that attempts to prove one candidate's superiority over another will likely contain references to the other candidate's point of view, whereas a speech about the importance of tax reforms will likely contain multiple facts and statistics marshalled to prove the speaker's point. No one structure is better or worse than the next; it all depends on the work that the passage is trying to do.

Understanding this will make it easier either to answer a question about the structure and function of a particular excerpt, or to write a well-structured text yourself. If you know what kind of work you want each paragraph to be doing in your own text (or if you understand what each work each paragraph is doing in someone else's text) then you'll be well-equipped to answer any questions about structure on the AP exam.

Not sure what this means? Check out questions on how purpose influences structure [here](#).

## Elements of Structure: Part 1

All non-fiction texts will have some semblance of a beginning, a middle, and an end. You may be familiar with the five-paragraph-essay that begins with an introduction, contains three body paragraphs, and ends with a conclusion that neatly summarizes everything you just read. High-level texts won't necessarily do that, but most contain some kind of beginning/introduction, middle, and end.

### 1. The Beginning

This is where the author will furnish you with some sort of context or introduction; it's rare that great nonfiction texts will simply launch into a detailed explanation of the topic without first giving you some context.

Think about the beginning of "I Have A Dream" -- Dr. King begins it by first addressing the audience and giving some context for the occasion. He addresses the audience ("I am happy to join with you today...") and then delivers a highly effective "hook" laden with references to President Lincoln in order to give the audience some additional context on his purpose for writing. Or think about President Roosevelt's Presidential Address following Pearl Harbor -- the first paragraph simply addresses the American people and gives some context for why the speech is happening. Or President Obama's 2014 State of the Union Address, which introduced several seemingly random instances of Americans doing something great -- a teacher lifting America's graduation rates, an entrepreneur creating jobs, an autoworker perfecting a fuel-efficient car, a farmer preparing for spring -- and wove them together to give some context for the address he was about to deliver.

So though it is a little bit juvenile to think about structure as being made up of "beginning, middle, and end," this is a very good place to start thinking about how the author generally organized a given passage -- what s/he expected each large, general section of the passage to *do*.

Not sure how the beginning relates to the rest of a piece? Practice [here](#).

### 2. The Middle

The middle is always the trickiest bit -- and unless you're concentrating on a specific text, talking about "the middle" is generally unhelpful because every text is different and has a differently structured "middle" part. In general, this is where the author will delve into the nitty gritty -- the specific details that s/he began introducing at the start of the piece. In other words, this is where all of the specific examples, evidence, and arguments will go. If the beginning of a piece gives context (and provides a general idea of what the author will be arguing over the rest of the passage), then "the middle" will outline claims (which we will discuss below), provide evidence and examples for those claims, and attempt to generally support and prove any assertions that the author makes. This will be the bulk of any passage, so read it closely and carefully.

For more on "the middle," check out [this question](#), and look in Section Two of this outline for a better understanding of how authors introduce structure and organization to "the middle" of texts.

### 3. The End

Again, when organizing a passage into these extremely general "buckets," you lose a certain sense of nuance. There is much more to "the end" of a text than just a hasty summary of everything that has already been said; final words and lines have great power, and often serve to tie entire passages together and to leave the audience with whatever lasting feelings or impressions -- whether positive, negative, or simply galvanizing -- the author seeks to impart. Multiple impressive techniques and feats of rhetoric can go into creating an effective ending for a passage, so make sure you pay close attention to the end of a passage, especially as that is where any calls to action may be found and analyzed.

To practice your understanding of "the end" of a passage -- particularly the types of techniques authors use to ensure an effective ending -- check out [this question](#).

## **Elements of Structure, Part 2**

This is where we will give a much more in-depth consideration to how the author structures those said "beginnings," "middles," and "ends." While it may be useful to consider those general divisions on a very basic level, to truly get at a "nitty gritty" analysis of a text's structure, you'll need to be able to assess the author's intention and organization with much greater clarity and much sharper tools. Most of these organizational features will be found in that amorphous "middle" of

the passage, as these are the elements that will help to impose a sense of structure and organization upon it.

### 1. Claims

Every piece will contain some kind of claim.

It doesn't matter what it is. It can be a broad statement on how Americans can combat climate change by switching to compost, or it can be a specific comment on the author's personal feelings about Episode 43 of *The Simpsons*. Either way, the claim is there.

But when claims can be so specialized and so diverse, how do you know what the claim actually *is*? How can you find and assess it?

Think of a claim as an overarching statement of purpose, in which the text tells you what it is trying to accomplish. In the above scenarios, those two disparate claims are trying to either:

- Convince the reader that switching to compost is America's only hope for surviving climate change
- Inform the reader about the author's opinion of *The Simpsons*

Either way, the claims are doing something. They have a purpose, and they will need to be backed up by evidence. This already gives you some sense of structure, because generally -- GENERALLY! -- each paragraph will be dedicated to one specific claim and the specific evidence that accompanies it. (Of course, there can and will be passages that only have one specific claim, in which every subsequent paragraph simply outlines further evidence for that one overarching claim.) And if the passage you're reading contains a thesis, think of it as the Master Claim, which gives you a high-level overview of all the claims that the passage will try to prove.

Regardless of HOW the text presents them, claims (and the evidence that corresponds to them) are the bread and butter of a text's organizational structure, since they provide the reader with an easily understood "Mission Statement" and its accompanying evidence, making it far easier to refer to specific paragraphs by understanding and explaining their purpose.

Thinking of a claim as being a statement of purpose can be potentially misleading, so if you're confused, remember this: a claim simply expresses some kind of argument or opinion and introduces the purpose of a certain paragraph or piece -- whether it's a thesis statement that clearly outlines what the text will focus on, or a series of statements that the author will then try to back up using all kinds of evidence (e.g. an opinion in a book review).

Get in the habit of marking claims where you see them. This will make understanding the rest of the structure of a text much easier. The placement of a claim -- and the support of a claim -- is absolutely crucial to the process of understanding how a text is structured, because claims can be thought of as the "backbones" of rhetorical passages. Once you identify where a claim is placed, suddenly many other elements of text structure become clear -- you see what the piece is trying to do, how, and whether it is successful.

Feeling unclear about claims? Test yourself [here](#), remembering that claims are just statements of purpose that help outline what an author is trying to accomplish in a given paragraph or passage.

## 2. Counterclaims / counterarguments

So you've read the passage, marked up all the claims, and come to a general understanding of how the author used claims to structure the text. If you can assess what each claim seeks to do -- as well as understand the evidence that an author uses to bolster each claim, then you're well on your way to understanding the text fully. But what if you come to a "counterclaim" (also known as a "counterargument"), which now contradicts everything that all previous claims and bits of evidence seemed to support?

Counterclaims will not come out of nowhere. They will be introduced with statements like "As my opponent says," or "Some believe" or "A different argument maintains..." -- in other words, with transition words that help the reader understand that the author is switching gears and taking on alternate points of view. But this doesn't mean, of course, that the author is changing his or her mind. Instead, writers use counterclaims to further bolster *their own arguments*.

Think about why counterclaims are effective: if marshalled correctly, they demonstrate that an author has thought about the opposition and can address relevant opposing points cogently and successfully, ensuring that his/her

argument is the only one left standing. This is an especially persuasive strategy in campaign speeches, in galvanizing texts, and in arguments (whether practical, inductive, or deductive). As such, not every text contains counterclaims. But be on the lookout for the ones that do, as they introduce even more structure into a given piece.

When practicing your own essays, particularly persuasive essays, strive to include a counterclaim most of the time. This will help you to become a more effective writer, and will indicate that you have truly thought about all the sides of an issue -- including those that do not necessarily convince you.

Still not sure about counterclaims? Assess your understanding [here](#).

### 3. Rebuttals

If counterclaims are where the author demonstrates that s/he has thought about each side of an issue, rebuttals -- which directly follow counterclaims -- demonstrate that his/her opinion is the correct one. The counterclaim sets up and explains an alternate viewpoint, and the rebuttal completely demolishes it. In essence, the rebuttal is “evidence” for why the counterclaim is wrong. You’ll often see rebuttals introduced by words like “However,” or bracketed by words like “false,” “incorrect,” “inaccurate,” “untrue,” etc -- in short, words that indicate that the counterclaim is wrong and the author’s original argument was right. Rebuttals should be relatively easy to locate -- if you have located the counterclaim, the rebuttal will follow soon after.

Want to practice your understanding of rebuttals? Try [this question](#). Want a meatier challenge? Try constructing your own argument, including a convincing claim, a well-reasoned counterclaim, and a rebuttal that accurately demolishes the counterargument. Your writing and reasoning skills will be far stronger for it.

### 4. Transitions

We have already touched on transitions; every time this article has instructed you to pay attention to surrounding words or preceding statements (as in the claims, counterclaims, and rebuttal portions of this outline), it has in fact directed you to pay attention to transitions.

In order to prevent all writing from being an “amorphous blob” with a bloated middle, authors use transitions to introduce ideas, shift gears, or continue trains of thought.

You may remember “transition words” from your English classes, so pay close attention to them, because they will help signal any changes in focus or purpose, or extensions in ideas and thoughts.

Words like “additionally,” “moreover,” “too,” “also,” “as well,” “because of...” etc. will signal a reinforcement of the arguments or points previously made, whereas “however,” “but,” “on the other hand,” and so forth will signal a shift in focus or tone -- a change from one idea to another.

Get into the habit of marking all of these transition words as you see them, because the more familiar you are with transition words, the easier it will become to use them to analyze the structure of a piece and the work that a particular paragraph does. For example, if one paragraph begins with a specific claim and the next continues with an “Additionally,” or a “Moreover,” it will be pretty clear that the second paragraph is simply an extension of the first. If, however, the next paragraph after a claim begins with “On the other hand,” or “Contrary to this...” it’s pretty clear that there is a shift in focus, which will make the structure of the piece far easier to understand.

There is no shortcut for understanding transitions, other than reading often and widely and marking up passages every time you see a transition. Once you annotate a text, you’ll be amazed at just how many times authors use transitions in a passage. For extra practice, use transitions in your own writing. Every time you shift focus or want to clarify or extend a thought, add in a transition. Often, students don’t use enough enough transitions in their writing, which means that they ignore the transitions in already-published texts, limiting their understanding of structure. But the more transitions you observe and use yourself, the better equipped you will be to understand shifts in perspective and therefore changes in organization and structure.

Still not sure about transitions? Test your skills [here](#). As you answer the question, consider why this might be an effective transition -- even if it doesn’t utilize a common “transition word.” If you understand why this counts as a transition question, you are well on your way to mastering transitions.

## Types of Structure

It would be impractical and well outside the scope of this outline to provide a plenary list of the types of readings -- and thus the types of structure -- that you may encounter on the AP English Language test. But one good way to think about structure is to assess the rhetorical mode being used, as they often go hand in hand.

As explained in the section on Rhetorical Modes, modes can and do conform to different structures, so this is in no way a list of hard-and-fast rules. There is no guarantee that every compare-and-contrast mode will be structured in the same way. But you can apply some general principles using these tips:

1. **Argument** → this structure will likely contain some central thesis and then a set of different forms of evidence to back it up. You may also see smaller claims interspersed throughout the text, also accompanied by evidence. Arguments may take different forms -- refer to the outline on Rhetorical Modes for a more complete understanding of the different types of arguments you will be expected to understand -- but the most important thing to remember is that all arguments will contain at least one large central claim (likely more), follow a specific format to prove that argument using well-curated evidence, and end with the expectation that they have proved or at least supported the central claim. When assessing this type of structure, be on the lookout for claims, evidence, and (in certain cases) general principles that the author wants you to extrapolate or beliefs and actions s/he wishes you to take away. Understanding every element of the way an argument is constructed will grant you a fuller understanding of the structure of the text in general.

Still unclear on arguments? Practice your understanding [here](#).

2. **Compare and Contrast** → Again, as with argument, this can take many forms. But be aware of where the author uses similarities and differences, as this will help you to come to a fuller understanding of the structure that s/he is using. This will also help you to answer questions about how the passage is structured -- does it begin with a claim? A scenario to be compared or contrasted? A piece of evidence to be held up as a barometer for future facts or scenarios? Again, understanding how the author uses compare and contrast will make it much easier to answer granular

questions about the structure of isolated paragraphs, as well as the structure of the entire passage as a whole.

Want to practice some Compare and Contrast questions? Try [this one](#) out.

3. Narrative → A narrative structure may be one of the easiest to analyze, structure-wise, since often these are constructed in a linear or sequential fashion. Be on the lookout for words such as “first,” “second,” “then,” “afterwards,” or specific dates -- this will indicate the sequence of events and make it much easier for you to analyze the structure of either selected snippets or the passage as a whole.

Assess your understanding of how modes influence structure [here](#).

## Key Takeaways

Organization and structure are crucial elements to any piece of writing, whether it's one you create yourself or another author's work. So as you analyze other author's works or create your own, remember these key points:

1. Pay close attention and *annotate*. Whether you're looking for claims, counterclaims, rebuttals, or transitions -- or just trying to figure out the difference between that “beginning,” “middle,” and “end” -- you'll need to mark up your text to make all subsequent searching easier. This is a highly positive habit that will help make you into a far more effective reader and writer.
2. Remember that all passages will follow some general structure. Pay attention to hints like purpose, context, tone, and rhetorical modes (like arguments, compare and contrast, and so forth) that will help anchor your understanding of what that structure may be.
3. Remember that all good writing is well-organized and focused. When writing, you may want to make an outline before you actually begin; this will help you structure an essay so that you have a general skeleton and you're just “filling in the blank.”

Think you got it? Practice with all of Learnerator's Organization and Structure questions [here](#).

# How to Approach Main Idea AP English Language Questions

## General Overview

Determining the “main idea” of a passage should be a directive familiar to you from years of schooling. There is a reason that your understanding the “main idea” of a passage receives so much attention from your English teacher; standardized tests prioritize this skill perhaps above all others. Your understanding of the main idea of a passage undergirds every other intellectual task -- because how can you analyze meaning, structure, function, and rhetorical modes and devices without first understanding what the author is trying to say?

In other words, without a clear understanding of the main idea of a passage, sentence, or paragraph, it is impossible to determine the relationship between component parts or analyze the way in which the passage is constructed.

Remember, a main idea is not just a single word; the main idea of this piece, for example, is not “AP English Language.” That is the subject or topic of this piece, but if you are looking for main idea, you’ll want to give a full sentence, or at least a clause. For example, the main idea of this piece is “Strategies for acing Main Idea questions in AP English Language.”

This is important to remember -- should you ever see a question that asks for main idea and then gives you one-words answers, you know to eliminate that answer. (The AP English Language test will likely not give you a freebie of this magnitude... but this is helpful advice to keep in mind regardless, because many students labor under the misconception that a main idea can be summarized in one word. It cannot.)

When it comes to comprehending a piece, there are few shortcuts; at the AP level, it is assumed that your reading comprehension skills are strong. But many of the pieces you’ll read over the course of the test will no doubt be complex, and so here are a number of tips that will help you determine the main idea of a long and complex passage:

## Dig Up the Bones

*No AP English Language passages will be harmed in the course of this paragraph.*

This advice may seem familiar to you from the Author's Meaning section, but it remains highly relevant:

When trying to determine main idea, first understand what the piece *is*. Is this a letter? A diary entry? A pamphlet? Speech? Persuasive text? Autobiography?

Understanding the “bones” of the text (i.e., what it is and how it is structured) will help you determine where you can find the main ideas.

For example, a persuasive essay or paper will contain a thesis outlining what the passage is trying to do and therefore making your job nice and easy.

However, a political speech such as the State of the Union Address may meander, which will make you work a little bit harder to determine the main idea of each component paragraph. But understanding what the piece *is* will automatically help you to determine what it is trying to do and what it is trying to say -- which in turn will help you gauge how successful it is in presenting its main idea(s).

Additionally, understanding what a piece *is* will lead to a clearer understanding of what a piece *does*, structurally speaking. High-level texts will not always be organized like the classic five paragraph essay, with topic sentences summing up the main ideas of each paragraph, but every nonfiction piece does follow a basic structure that will contain clues as to the main idea. (For more on Structure and Organization, see here.)

A letter, for example, may contain basic pleasantries and perhaps personal information before it delves into its “main idea,” whereas a diary entry (especially one written in high dudgeon) may launch directly into its larger point. And if you can isolate what an essay is trying to do -- present you with information about a scientific phenomenon, persuade you of a particular political opinion, expand your understanding of a process or fact, critique a piece of art or literature, or anything in between -- you'll be able to find the place where it begins to do its “work.”

This is another place where reading widely and often will help you; if you are exposed to enough book reviews, letters pamphlets, essays, speeches, and other

rhetorical works, you will soon learn where most pieces begin to “do their work,” so to speak, and delve into their main ideas.

Think you’ve got it? Practice [here](#).

## **Repetition**

Often, a writer will emphasize the same concept repeatedly, particularly if s/he feels strongly about it or if the purpose of the text is clear and obvious. Think about a political campaign speech, for example, the purpose of which will always be to gain the listener’s vote. The speech itself may meander over several topics -- tax reform, job creation, other issues pertinent to the target demographic -- but will always return to the underlying message which is (broadly speaking): “Vote for me because.”

To determine the main idea, look for repetition -- whether of ideas/principles or of specific words and their synonyms. When an author mentions an idea repeatedly, that is a good indication that it can be considered the “main idea” of a text.

Test your repetition-assessing skills [here](#). Remember, the crux of repetition is in concepts, not just specific words -- if you see the same concept over and over, there’s a good chance you are on to the main idea.

## **Evidence**

Perhaps the best way to determine the main idea of a passage is to assess what evidence is being used -- and, more importantly, what it is being used *for*.

Remember that a crucial element of high-level texts is citation of relevant evidence -- the burden of proof is on the writer, regardless of whether s/he is actually trying to persuade you of anything. A political speech is one thing (as its very nature relies on getting a large group of people to perform one specific action) but even a text that is not necessarily persuasive in nature -- a book review, a piece of literary criticism, an Op-Ed -- will need to “prove” its central tenet.

(Wait a minute, you might be saying. An Op-Ed or a piece of criticism are by their nature persuasive! Perhaps in a certain light -- but we are defining persuasive here as “explicitly attempting to sway another person’s opinion.” That is not necessarily the case with book reviews or Op-Eds; works like that do not seek to

change your mind, necessarily, simply to present the author's opinion. In most cases, whether you end up convinced or not is of little consequence to the author.)

However, every text requires "proof" of some sort; a book review is not convincing if the reviewer simply repeats "This book was good" seventy times. Instead, the reviewer will focus on specific parts of the text that were "good" -- e.g. "The author manipulates the English language with a prowess unseen since the days of Shakespeare" or "This book is so masterfully constructed that I lay awake until three in the morning trying to guess the identity of the masked villain." All of these provide *evidence* for the central tenet -- i.e. the book's relative "goodness" -- and can help you figure out the main idea.

If the evidence or the proof in a piece consistently points you in the same direction, there's a pretty good chance that you have found the main idea -- the thing that the author is trying to prove or reinforce. This is the case with all texts, whether the writer uses anecdotes, facts, statistics, opinions, or some combination to back up his/her assertions. If all or most pieces of evidence point you in the same direction, you have found your main idea.

Think you've got it? Practice using evidence to find main idea [here](#) and [here](#).

## **Assertions**

When considering evidence, you'll most likely be asked to do some deductive reasoning -- using the established principles in the text, you'll come to a likely conclusion about how an author feels about a related topic.

This is another place where using the evidence comes in handy. If an author consistently repeats and reinforces one idea, then you'll use what you know about that idea in order to answer questions about similar concepts that an author might support.

This means you'll have to analyze the claims that an author makes and try to understand how s/he uses evidence to back up those assertions. Practice your understanding of claims and assertions [here](#).

Once you have a good handle on the claims that an author makes, you'll want to see if you can use them to answer questions that require making inferences. Remember, reading isn't just about accepting what's on the page, but about using what is on the page to make concrete decisions and predictions. For example,

in [this question](#), you'll need to use what you know about the author, what you understand from the text, and the assertions that you see in order to support your answer.

Again, this is something that you can only do if you fully understand the main idea -- if you can look at the way that an author presents an idea and then backs it up with evidence. The key word here is evidence; you can *claim* that an author feels a certain way about a specific topic, but if you need to be able to point to instances in the text that explicitly support your assertion.

Think you've got it? Practice your skills [here](#).

## **Texts in Isolation**

Often, you will be asked about the main idea of much smaller pieces of text -- not necessarily the entire passage, but isolated paragraphs, or the beginning, middle, or end of a piece. The College Board asks you these types of questions to ensure that you understand how all the elements in a passage fit together. This will help you deepen and refine your understanding of organization and structure -- not to mention author's purpose and meaning.

In AP English Language -- and indeed in the entirety of the liberal arts -- all elements interlock and work together to create meaning. So it is nearly impossible to untangle one from the next -- to pull apart the structure from the main idea, for example, as one creates the other, or to decouple main idea from rhetorical mode as one might determine the next. All elements of a text will exert influence over one another -- which will, happily, help you to determine the main idea as all functions and structures of a text are interrelated.

Not sure what this means? Check out questions like [this](#) or [this](#), and see if you can determine the main ideas in those isolated portions of the text. This will help deepen your understanding of the text as a whole.

## **Tone and Attitude**

Inherent in your investigation of main idea will be a rich understanding of the author's tone. As discussed elsewhere, the author's tone -- how s/he feels about a subject -- will be clearly communicated in the words that s/he uses.

But tone can be much more subtle than just "positive" or "negative." A tone can be neutral and professional, lacking in any words that indicate opinion or

emotion, or it can be deeply vitriolic. Tone and attitude are important to your understanding of main idea because they help to create a full picture of how the author *feels* about the main idea.

Often, the AP will ask you a question that is much more complex than just “what is the main idea?” You may be asked something like “How does the author convey tone in Paragraph Three?” A question like that will require you to not only understand the main idea of Paragraph 3, but also how the author feels about it. Most importantly, you’ll need to cite the evidence you use to justify how you know the author’s feelings.

As with all of writing, these concepts are interrelated, and understanding one will help you better understand another.

Think you’ve got a good handle on tone and attitude? Try analyzing tone and attitude [here](#).

## Key Takeaways

Perhaps because it is so important -- and so all-encompassing, the main idea is often difficult to assess. But if you use the following tips, you’ll be sure to find some success.

1. Let structure drive your understanding. Figure out what you are reading, which will help you figure out where to look for big claims, assertions, and thesis statements. These will help you to summarize the main idea in a sentence.
2. Be aware of repetitions. If an author comes back to the same idea over and over -- or uses similar language consistently throughout the piece -- there’s a good chance that s/he wants you to pay close attention to these concepts and statements. If you’re seeing a lot of repetition, you’re onto something.
3. Follow the evidence. If you’re having a hard time finding the main idea, but you’re seeing lots of evidence for specific claims, work backwards. What does this evidence prove? What do these claims have in common? Often, there will be an overarching theme or concept that ties this all together. That unifying concept is the main idea.

Think you’ve got it? Check out all of Learnerator’s Main Idea questions [here](#), and remember: the more you practice this skill, the better you will get at isolating the main idea of a whole passage or just a paragraph.

# How to Approach Rhetorical Mode AP English Language Questions

## General Overview

“Rhetorical Mode” is simply a fancy way of saying “the way the author presents the subject.” All non-fiction texts are arranged according to a rhetorical mode; understanding what that mode is will help you analyze the structure of the piece as well as its intent. Additionally, identifying and analyzing how a rhetorical mode is constructed will help you to become a more discerning reader as well as a more adept writer.

A quick word about rhetorical modes: they are heavily related to organization and structure as well as to rhetorical strategies. We will touch on these concepts, but for a fuller understanding, consult the topic outlines titled Organization and Structure and Author’s Meaning.

One non-fiction text can and often does contain a variety of rhetorical modes. A well-organized text manages to do this in a way that is both sophisticated and convincing.

Think of rhetorical mode as the answer to the question: “What is the author DOING here?” How is the author presenting the subject? Is s/he making an argument? A comparison? A joke? Using a narrative or a list of descriptions to get at a larger point? *What* is the author saying, and *how*?

In order to answer this question, you need to read the text and mark the rhetorical modes that you see. This will give you an in-depth view of the multiple modes used within a single text, and will help you answer any specific questions about mode, strategy, structure, organization, and even purpose that you may come across on the test.

Before you read any further, stop and see if you can answer this question.

Even if you got the question right, it’s important to review the multiple types of rhetorical modes, particularly as the pieces you will come across on the AP English Language test will no doubt employ all of these. This list outlines the most common of the rhetorical modes.

## Argument

Any persuasive piece of writing will use this rhetorical mode to fulfill its purpose of convincing you, the reader, of the veracity or validity of a larger point. All arguments require sufficient evidence, supporting details, and justifiable reasons.

At the end of the day, arguments are opinions. They may be rooted in facts (which would count as supporting evidence), but the entire point of an argument is to convince the reader of something that is debatable. There is, at this point in time, no way to argue that the earth is flat. We know this to be definitively untrue, so it is no longer debatable. The AP Language test will likely contain texts that make arguments that you don't necessarily find convincing, but every argument presented will at least be in the realm of what is debatable. This is important to remember, particularly when you are constructing your own arguments. You don't need to convince everyone; you don't even need to be "right." All you need to do is construct an argument around something that is debatable and try and furnish the best evidence that you possibly can. This is really the key to any argument -- not whether you are "right" or "wrong," and not whether your audience is convinced... just that you try to present as convincing an argument as possible using multiple sources of evidence and support.

But what kind of arguments are most commonly used in AP English Language texts?

There are multiple types of arguments; simply knowing that the text is making an argument is not enough to prove that you understand rhetorical mode. The College Board is likely to ask you about the various types of argument commonly found in non-fiction texts. These are:

a. inductive

An inductive argument sets forth specific premises; these specific premises are used to lead to or support a specific conclusion. One example of an inductive argument would be:

Premise -- He has never read a book.

Conclusion -- He will never read a book.

The conclusion is not *guaranteed* -- it is not a fact -- but it is *likely*, based on the premises that the author uses to set it up. This argument relies heavily on

inferences; you make an inference, or “educated guess” based on a principle or premise that you know to be true. Your inference may prove to be incorrect, but provided you are making the best guess possible based on what you already know, your reasoning is sound. (Inductive reasoning, incidentally, is probably the best way to make any life decisions -- basing what you may do on principles that you already know to be true or to have a certain result. Inductive reasoning: not just for the AP English Language classroom!)

A note about inductive reasoning: You may sometimes see this type of reasoning characterized as an argument that goes from more specific principles to general principles -- i.e. the statement of a general principle based on a specific instance. That is one way to think about it, but it is more sophisticated to think about this structure in the way outlined above, in which a specific and/or “known” premise will likely lead to a plausible conclusion.

b. deductive

As with an inductive argument, the deductive argument begins with a premise and leads to a conclusion. But in a deductive argument, the conclusion *must* be true if you grant the premise. One example of such an argument would be:

Premise -- She is a unicorn.

Premise -- All unicorns are purple.

Conclusion -- She is purple.

This argument is, of course, nonsense. But it is still a good example of deductive reasoning. If we grant that she is a unicorn and that all unicorns are purple, it is *inescapable* that she is purple. This argument is useful when authors want to demonstrate that something is true beyond the shadow of a doubt. Whether they can actually prove that depends on the evidence that they give, but when working with facts or statistics in an informative or persuasive essay, you will likely use deductive reasoning to prove your point.

Sometimes you may see this characterized as an argument that goes from the more general to the more specific. While this definition has fallen out of favor among philosophers, it remains current with high school English teachers.

c. abductive

The abductive argument may be the most interesting. Unlike the inductive or deductive argument, which set up premises that lead to conclusions, the abductive explanation uses its conclusion to *explain* its premises. Writers might use this in a narrative essay that seems to explain something, or even in an informative or persuasive essay that seeks to demonstrate *why* something is the way it is.

One example of an abductive argument would be:

Premise -- I am very happy.

Conclusion -- I must be holding a balloon.

This argument uses abductive reasoning to explain its premise, but it is neither inductive nor deductive because the conclusion (the explanation) is not discussed in the premises of the argument. If the premise had argued:

Premise -- Holding a balloon is guaranteed to make a person happy.

Premise -- I am holding a balloon.

Conclusion -- Therefore, I am happy

it would have been a deductive argument. However, because our argument did not create an explicit link between its premise and its conclusion (and instead used its conclusion to explain its premise), it is not deductive or inductive but abductive.

#### d. Practical

You will often see practical arguments in pamphlets, speeches, campaigns -- any text with an agenda. If a text is prescriptive -- i.e., if it sets up a scenario and uses those premises to recommend a course of action -- then chances are it is making a practical argument. (Thus, you'll come across this kind of argument most often in persuasive texts.) An example of a practical argument would be:

Premise -- The last candidate was a real bozo.

Conclusion -- Hence, you should vote for me.

This is not an inductive argument -- the premise doesn't make the conclusion likely. Nor is it deductive argument -- the premise does not make the conclusion

true. Even if it's true (or likely) that the last candidate was a bozo, that does not *guarantee* that you should vote for the current candidate. There could be other candidates who are far better qualified. However, the argument is prescriptive -- it tells you what to do -- so it is a practical argument.

#### e. Analogous

As is perhaps obvious in its name, an analogous argument sets up a direct comparison between two things in order to prove a certain premise. The more similarities the argument can marshal, the stronger the argument becomes. This, for example, is a weak analogical argument:

Premise: Narwhals, like unicorns, have horns inexplicably situated at the tops of their heads. Conclusion: Narwhals, like unicorns, are figments of our imagination.

There is a direct comparison being made here. Unfortunately, it's weak and patently untrue. However, analogical arguments are highly useful -- especially in the context of the synthesis essay -- because they bring two sources in direct conversation with one another, which is a skill that the College Board expects you to practice both in your writing and in your critical reading. This is a mode that is directly related to comparison and contrast, which we will discuss in fuller detail later on in this essay.

#### f. Enthymeme

It is highly unlikely that the College Board will ask you to name this argument. However, it's worth knowing about for two reasons: 1, it's a delightfully fun word to whip out in casual conversation and 2, your ability to recognize an enthymeme will strengthen your ability to classify arguments. An enthymeme is an argument that *doesn't give you enough information between the premise and the conclusion* to figure out whether the reasoning is inductive or deductive. The argument can still be entirely logical, but it skips a step. For example:

Premise -- Being raised bilingual will make it much easier to acquire a third language.

Conclusion -- I have recently and easily learned to speak a third language.

This isn't an inductive argument -- it isn't implausible for us to infer that the speaker was raised bilingual, but s/he never tells us that explicitly, so the inductive reasoning misses a step. Nor is it deductive -- the conclusion does not follow inescapably from the premise. This doesn't make the argument "bad" or "illogical," just hard to classify.

Understanding how to classify an argument will help you sharpen your own argumentation skills, whether spoken or written. And a facility with different types of reasoning will prove highly useful in future college classes.

Practice your understanding of different types of reasoning and argument [here](#).

## **Comparison and Contrast**

We briefly touched on the compare and contrast model in our section on arguments. Analogical argumentation is a type of comparison; as stated previously, comparing and contrasting lets authors look at a variety of sources and see how they relate to one another. This ability is referred to as "synthesis," a type of advanced critical thinking.

Authors will use compare and contrast for a variety of reasons -- they may be trying to prove that one argument is better than another, or they may use comparison and contrast to bolster their own claim by proving that it is like another argument.

Assessing whether an author is using comparison and contrast is pretty simple; look for words like "just as," "like," "similarly," "in comparison," "in contrast," and "unlike." The real trick is figuring out why an author chose to use that particular mode. Often, an author will use this to persuade you -- for example, if one instance or premise is true, then drawing similarities between that premise and the author's main point will in turn bolster the main point. But the author may also use this strategy as a plea for an emotional response or a way to inform you of the differences and similarities between two things. As always, the reason an author picks a particular rhetorical mode largely depends on the context in which this mode is being used.

Practice your understanding of comparison and contrast [here](#).

## Cause and Effect

Another popular rhetorical mode is cause and effect. Authors may use this strategy to bolster a claim by proving that there is a direct link between one thing and another. Again, cause and effect -- like comparison and contrast -- is a strategy used to indicate relationships between multiple sources or threads of argument. This is another skill that is helpful for you to practice in your own writing, particular in the synthesis essay. If you can prove a direct link or relationship between two (or more) sources or ways of thinking, you are demonstrating facility with the skill of synthesis, which involves drawing out the relationship between two arguments or sources.

Authors may use this strategy to persuade or to inform you, or even to call you to action. For example, drawing a direct link between gasoline consumption in the United States (cause) and the thinning of the ozone layer (effect) in an essay about global warming can be a very effective way to persuade people (through practical argument) to start taking mass transit more often. As always, the reasoning behind a particular mode or strategy simply depends on the context.

## Classification

The rhetorical mode of classification is exactly what it sounds like -- a mode in which a topic or argument is named, defined, or classified -- either within a hierarchy (i.e. "This is where this idea fits best") or independent of an external context (i.e. "This is what this idea is or means.") This is particularly useful when the author is discussing a higher-level or possibly arcane concept that needs to be parsed and fleshed out. You may also see this in philosophical papers that seek to define terms and classify arguments for maximum clarity.

Assess your understanding of classification [here](#).

## Description

Often, authors will use heavy description to get their points across. Description can be one way to illustrate a particular phenomenon or issue, or it can be used as a way to awaken the reader's sympathy or interest. Description *can* be strongly related to narration -- employing a story or sequence of events in order to get a point across -- but it is its own rhetorical mode. Often, it's used to provide evidence for a particular claim; for example, if an author makes a claim about specific conditions, s/he must then demonstrate that this claim is accurate by

describing those conditions with as much specific detail as possible. (For example, if the author’s purpose is to persuade you that many American public schools are in serious need of reform, s/he will likely describe in great detail the conditions in the average low-performing public school in order to arouse your sympathy as well as increase your understanding of the topic, so that s/he can ultimately better persuade you to the “rightness” of the cause.)

This is a good rhetorical mode to practice when you are doing your own writing, because description is just one form of marshaling evidence for your claims. Practice your understanding of description [here](#).

## **Narrative**

A narrative mode tells a story. Like description, it may rely on details to get the larger point across -- a story is only as good as the details it provides and the interest it arouses -- but that is not necessarily the only narrative mode. Narrative modes can also be sequential -- i.e. outlining a series of events, either in chronological order or in the form of cause and effect.

In a sense, narrative modes are the most “elastic” of the rhetorical modes because they can be paired with compare and contrast, description, cause and effect, and even in some cases argument. So a narrative mode might be used to persuade, to inform, or to entertain. Despite these multiple purposes, one fact remains: If the passage or paragraph you are reading is telling you some sort of story, it’s using narrative mode.

See if you can answer [this question](#) about narrative mode.

## **More Practice**

Remember, rhetorical modes are purposeful and context-driven. When confronted with a question about rhetorical modes on the AP English Language test, remember these key points:

1. There are multiple types of argument; be familiar with the differences between inductive, deductive, abductive, analogous, and practical arguments.
2. You may see a variety of rhetorical modes within one text, as authors differentiate their strategies based on the point they are trying to get across. Be aware that different modes can be paired with different

- purposes – compare and contrast can be used for informative, persuasive, or even entertainment purposes, so read carefully.
3. Rhetorical modes, like rhetorical functions, are always purposeful. Analyze carefully and closely, and choose your own preferred modes wisely when you sit down to do your writing.

Can't get enough of rhetorical modes? Practice further with multiple passage-based questions about modes [here](#). And when practicing for the AP English Language exam, don't forget to try out these modes when you are writing your own essays, regardless of your essays' purposes. Because while recognizing and analyzing these modes will make you a better critical reader and thinker, employing these modes will make you a stronger and more effective writer.

# How to Approach Rhetoric AP English Language Questions

## General Overview

At its heart, the AP English Language and Composition test is designed to assess your understanding of rhetoric and rhetorical function -- both in your own writing and in your analysis of others' writing. But this, of course, hinges on your understanding of what rhetoric actually is. As defined by the all-knowing Google, rhetoric is simply "the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the use of figures of speech and other composition techniques." In other words, rhetoric is just a type of non-fiction speaking or writing that relies on specific modes and strategies in order to be effective.

This isn't anything new -- *all* communication depends on specific techniques, and in some cases, rules, in order to be effective. Rhetoric is simply a form of communication -- a way to persuade, inform, or entertain someone with your words. This means that you are already using it! Every time you present and/or defend an opinion, you are using rhetoric. Ever try to inform someone about something? Congratulations; you've used rhetoric.

The trick is knowing how to utilize rhetoric most *effectively*. There are two ways to do this:

1. Reading widely, to see how experts have used rhetoric in the past for a variety of purposes and across a multitude of contexts. This is also why your teachers have had you *analyze* works instead of simply reading them -- why you've had to write essays that describe the different strategies that authors use in their writing, and why you've had to answer questions about the purpose of specific paragraphs. After all, the more exposure you have to specific forms of writing, the more familiar you become with certain techniques. This in turn will make you a more adept critical thinker because you are forced to truly think about *what* an author is doing and *why* (and evaluate whether it is effective.) Additionally, this will make you a better writer, and able to utilize specific techniques in your own writing.

2. In order to truly become a master of rhetoric, you need to practice using rhetorical writing, which utilizes a variety of strategies and modes to get your points across on paper. You can be an effective reader and an ineffective writer, but you cannot be an effective writer if you are not a good reader. This is why practicing your writing also means practicing your reading (another reason to answer all those many questions about specific rhetorical strategies, structure, meaning, organization, and purpose.)

Because the AP English Language test does not assess your speaking skills, we will leave aside the question of utilizing effective rhetoric in oral presentations and focus instead on rhetoric in the context of your own writing as well as your analysis of others' writings.

## Context

The College Board outlines a variety of specific concepts crucial to your understanding of rhetorical function. These may be familiar to you from our discussion of Author's Meaning -- remember, meaning is created through a variety of strategies dependent on purpose, function, and structure (i.e. what we call, simply, "rhetoric.")

It is absolutely crucial to understand the context in which a piece was written, as this will inform both its raw content as well as its purpose, its structure, the strategies it employs, and its ultimate message, or "meaning."

Take George W. Bush's 9/11 Address to the Nation. Because the speech was written and performed in the context of a very specific event, the way in which it was written was *necessarily* dependent on the needs of the nation in a time of crisis.

The 9/11 speech needed to be reassuring. It needed to display strength, solidarity, and sensitivity in equal measure -- to demonstrate to the world that the United States would not be cowed or intimidated while reassuring Americans that in the wake of this tragedy, we were *all* affected, and we would all mourn together. This was a tall order, and so the speech employed a variety of methods, modes, and strategies to get its point across.

Test your understanding of the 9/11 Address' context [here](#).

Every piece of writing is context-dependent, but this principle may be most apparent in texts written in extremity, such as “Ain’t I A Woman,” by Sojourner Truth, or “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury,” by Queen Elizabeth I. (And though the St. Crispin Day’s Speech in Shakespeare’s Henry V is technically part of a work of fiction, it too functions as a perfect example of context informing message.)

For example, Truth’s speech “Ain’t I A Woman” technically contains a grammatical error in its title and its every refrain -- but the reason for this is dependent on the context. It’s not that Truth was unaware of the conventions of standard written English. In fact, though the speech is written to mimic the speaking style we most commonly associate with Southern slaves, Truth was born and raised in New York and was a native Dutch speaker. Her speech was delivered using specific and recognizable speech patterns in order to emphasize solidarity with other slaves, and to make her own background as a slave more immediately apparent and understood. Thus, both the ultimate message of the speech -- equality for women; equality for African-Americans -- and the style in which it was written and delivered are context-dependent.

Practice your understanding of the famous Ain’t I A Woman speech [here](#); as you read, remember the specific context of the speech (including the fact that its author was a highly devout Christian with deep familiarity of the Bible).

Finally, Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth both wrote their speeches in a style that today would be considered overly ornate and circumlocutious -- not to mention antiquated and hard to understand. As with Truth’s speech, the style of writing is always a function of the context in which a piece was written.

But context extends far beyond style, diction, or syntax (which we’ll get to a little later!) Queen Elizabeth’s speech was delivered at a time when women were not commonly accepted as leaders -- or, indeed, as anything beyond mothers and wives. Thus, when reading, consider how this speech would translate into today’s context.

It is highly unlikely that a female leader, such as Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, Hillary Clinton, Benazir Bhutto, or Agathe Uwilingiyimana, would refer to herself as “weak and feeble” in this day and age. However, these female leaders, from countries as diverse as the UK, India, Israel, the US, Pakistan, and Rwanda, would probably follow the social norms of their countries, especially as relates to conventions and understandings of gender -- so don’t

simply assume that a modern speech doesn't have a rich and complex context undergirding it.

In short: when considering context, remember to take into account social and cultural mores, historical precedents, and the occasion and purpose of the text. But context can be subtle; the AP English Language test will not simply ask you "What is the context of this question?" Instead, you will be expected to pick up on the context independently, and use it to come to a fully developed analysis.

To fully develop your understand of context, answer this question, noting that it does not actually include the word "context."

## Appeals

Appeals are perhaps the best-known strategies that an author will employ to get his or her point across. (You can blame Aristotle for the fact that you need to know them.) There are three main forms of appeals: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. Over the course of a text, an author may employ one, two, or all three of these appeals, though this decision depends on the context and the purpose of the passage.

### Ethos

Ethos is the Greek word for "character." This appeal requires establishing the author's character or credibility -- i.e. the reason s/he is qualified to make any argument and ask you to believe it. Anyone can use this strategy -- you don't need to be famous to do so -- but you do need to provide evidence that you are as upstanding/intelligent as you claim to be. Perhaps unsurprisingly, using ethos tends to work best when you *really* know what you're talking about.

Ethos has another surprising use: advertisements. (Remember, the AP English Language curriculum requires you to be able to understand all sorts of "texts," even those that aren't actually or strictly texts.) This is one of the reasons that so many companies use celebrities to hawk their products -- these companies rely on "star power," or on the power of a celebrity's (perceived) character, to move a product. After all, if you see a Top Chef using a specific brand of pasta sauce, you are immediately moved to consider that this pasta sauce is "premium" since an expert in the field uses it! (Never mind that no self-respecting master chef would ever use jarred pasta sauce.)

Ethos rarely works by itself -- simply stating your credentials is not necessarily enough to make an argument convincing. (Otherwise, election speeches would be very short and very boring. “Vote for me, I went to Harvard and was a Senator” works in the first line of a speech, but it must be paired with another appeal in order to truly be effective.)

Think you’ve got a handle on ethos? Practice your understanding [here](#).

## Pathos

Pathos is particularly popular in texts that seek to inform or persuade the reader of something important. Often paired with a narrative or descriptive mode, pathos seeks to evoke an emotional response from the reader; thus, pathos can be an excellent method of supporting an assertion if the assertion demands a reaction based in emotion. Campaign speeches often use pathos effectively; so do memoirs, diary entries, letters, or speeches aimed at instigating a serious social change.

Remember that AP questions are often much more complex than “Which appeal is the author using?” (though this may indeed show up on the test.) In order to effectively demonstrate an understanding of these appeals, make sure that you understand *how* the author *creates* pathos. What words does s/he use? Where does s/he use them? Is s/he creating a narrative? Relating a personal experience? Relaying facts and statistics? Be able to point to where and how the author uses pathos, and monitor your own emotional response as well so you understand where and how the author is effective, as well as where and how the author might fall short.

Assess your understanding of pathos [here](#).

## Logos

In Greek, “logos” means “word” -- and is the basis of the English word “logic.” Indeed, an argument that uses logos employs logic and reasoning to get its point across. You may remember the different types of reasoning from our rhetorical modes outline; any of these types of reasoning would qualify as use of logos.

Logic is exceptionally important in the construction of an argument, and most arguments will draw upon this appeal even if they contain other appeals as well. Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman” speech is an excellent example of a text that contains all three appeals -- by virtue of being both a woman and a former slave,

she is well-equipped to speak on female and African-American rights (ethos). Certainly, no one can deny the deep emotional resonance of her speech (pathos). But there is also a kind of reasoning (logos) there -- one that contrasts the treatment white women receive with the treatment that black women receive, and finds a huge disparity, logically speaking.

Remember: appeals can be contained in any number of formats, structures, organizations, and types of writing. To achieve success on the AP English Language test -- as well as other in future contexts -- you should be able to isolate *where, why, and how* an author uses a specific appeal. This will help you to both recognize and evaluate texts on a high level.

Practice your understanding of the three appeals [here](#).

## Purpose

As discussed in the topic outline for Author's Meaning, an author's purpose is often broadly classified into three distinct categories: to inform, to entertain, and to persuade. Purpose is, like so much else about rhetoric, dependent on the context in which the piece was written.

But remember, there is much more nuance to author's purpose than simply answering the question "why was this piece written?" You must be able to point to parts of the passage that prove your point, and to be able to analyze the context that informs your answer. Remember also that texts are complex and that each sentence and paragraph has its own purpose far more complex than the pat answer of "to inform," "to persuade," or "to entertain."

In your own writing, ensure that every sentence, every paragraph, every piece of evidence is there for a reason -- that every part of your writing is doing some "heavy lifting" of its own. When it comes to your own writing, if you can't answer the question "what is the purpose of this sentence," then you need to go back and revise.

Practice your understanding of purpose [here](#).

## Audience

You may be familiar with the idea of the rhetorical triangle, in which the three elements work together to create meaning. We can think of the apex of the triangle as the "rhetor" (i.e. the writer/speaker), whereas the two points on the

base of the triangle are the Audience (the people reading or listening) and the Message (what the author is actually trying to impart.)

This triangle is extremely important because it demonstrates that there is no effective rhetoric within a vacuum; writers and speakers will change everything, from their diction to their message to their purposes, based on the audience. Consider, again, campaign speeches; the same candidate may give radically modified versions of the same speech to different demographics. George Bush's post 9/11 address was explicitly addressed to the American public; in interviews and conversations with non-American audiences (such as speeches to the United Nations or interviews with international media), the message was, naturally, slightly modified. If President Bush's job was to create a sense of reassurance for his public, it was the opposite when he was posturing on the world stage and vowing vengeance (or appealing to other nations for help in the war.) The context was the same, but once the audience changed, so did the message. You cannot alter one point on the triangle without altering another; they are interdependent.

Think you have a handle on the rhetorical triangle? Test yourself [here](#), and see if you understand the role of the audience in the context of effective rhetoric [here](#).

## **Attitude**

The author's attitude, or tone, is best understood as "how the author feels about the message s/he is imparting." Attitude becomes obvious when considering the audience of a piece; if you are ever unsure about the attitude of a piece, go through each paragraph and note whether it seems mostly negative or mostly positive. From there, you should be able to break this into a more nuanced distinction.

If you're stuck on tone, considering how you impart an attitude in your own writing. Do you use lots of strong and perhaps emotional words? Look for that in the author's work. Do you make jokes at your opponent's expense? There's a clue as to the tone. Do you cite multiple facts and statistics and maintain neutrality at all times? Look for that in the text. Remember that the purpose of the text will likely determine its tone; a philosophical paper meant to be edifying will likely not contain much strong or emotional language, and its tone will likely be neutral and professional. However, a fiery Op-Ed will certainly contain language that will make picking out its tone quite simple.

Assessing the tone or attitude of a piece is not a particularly difficult task; often, the AP English Language test will use high-level vocabulary in the answer choices in order to up the rigor of questions of this type. So if you're not doing well on tone / attitude questions, it may be time to review some vocabulary flashcards -- you could be losing points on basis of something as simple and avoidable as plain vocab.

Think you've got a good handle on attitude/tone? Assess your understanding [here](#).

## Diction

Diction, an essential part of the way a writer constructs a text, is simply defined as "a speaker/writer's choice of words in a text." (When orating, diction also refers to the way a speaker enunciates.)

Diction is a stylistic choice; it helps to create a feeling or emphasize an attitude. The English language is among the richest and largest in the world; we have countless synonyms to choose from, and an effective speaker and writer knows just which words to choose in order to be as convincing as possible.

Sojourner Truth demonstrated this very well in her "Ain't I A Woman," which mimicked the diction of a certain subset of the American population. Though Truth herself did not speak in the same way as Southern slaves -- she was northern-born, and a native Dutch speaker to boot -- she cleverly utilized this diction in order to get her point across.

But diction involves a lot more than just grammar; it also relates to how the writer expresses him or herself. Certain writers have earned a place in the American canon based in part on their unique diction; David Foster Wallace, for example, became famous for his unusually long, prolix sentences (not to mention his footnotes.) George Saunders is another writer whose diction is highly distinctive (and varies from story to story!) There are three good ways to help you understand diction:

1. Note people's speech patterns. Are there people you know whose speech patterns are influenced by region? Family background? Interest in a specific subculture? Heavy use of the Internet? Consider the difference between a clause like "Those eyes, though," and "Dem eyes, tho." Both say the same thing -- that person's eyes are particularly attractive -- but their

diction is sufficiently different to indicate that the sentiment is being expressed in wildly varying contexts.

2. Read widely. Become familiar with the many, many ways there are to say something. Try and see if you can identify specific writers just from the diction they use.
3. Write, a lot, and in varying context. Note how your writing changes -- your thoughts may look and sound a certain way in your AP English Language class, and seem entirely different in your *Pretty Little Liars* fanfic. That is not only good, it's essential -- this demonstrates that you have the sophisticated ability to vary your diction based on context (audience, purpose, message...) This is a crucial part of being a good AP English Language student, a good writer, and a critical thinker.

Think you've got a handle on diction? See if you can understand Thoreau's [here](#).

## Syntax

Like diction, syntax is a stylistic choice. Syntax simply refers to sentence formation and/or structure and is strongly related to one's grasp on grammar -- not necessarily on specific words, but on the way the sentiment is expressed on the sentence level. If your teacher ever tells you to vary your sentence structures/lengths, then s/he is in essence telling you to be wary of your syntax.

Writers may vary their syntax by using a variety of techniques. Examples include:

- Asyndeton (multiple descriptors strung together without a conjunction, e.g. "that government of the people, by the people, **for the people** shall not perish from the earth")
- Polysyndeton (multiple descriptors all linked by conjunctions, e.g. "It was red and yellow and green and brown and scarlet and black and ochre and peach...")
- Varying the lengths of neighboring sentences
- Varying the openers and closers of sentences
- Parallelism: Parallelism is a type of sentence structure that sets up two or more similar structures, e.g. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."
- Anaphora: A form of parallelism, anaphora is the repetition of the same phrase over and over, as in Dr. King's famous "I have a dream speech."

- Chiasmus: chiastic structure sets up an “X” or “criss-cross” structure, e.g.  
“Never let a fool kiss you  
Or a kiss fool you.”

This meaning and the grammar in this structure are both inverted, or “criss-crossed.” You’ll see this structure often in poetry as well as highly allusive texts that make multiple references to poems, Biblical or literary passages, or the Greek sages, and if you decide to use it, you certainly will have varied your syntax in ways both unusual and effective.

Think you have a good grasp on syntax? Test yourself [here](#).

## More Practice

Before you begin practicing, remember the key takeaways:

1. Being a strong reader and AP English Language student means reading widely, reading often, and annotating what you read.
2. Pay close attention to the grammar, structure, and specific words used in a passage. A writer’s diction and syntax say a lot – just as much, in some cases, as the passage itself.
3. Remember that every piece you read in AP English Language has been prodigiously worked over, edited, and revised. The rhetorical choices that authors make – from the types of appeals they use to the tone and attitude they impart – are intentional, so give them your due consideration. When writing your own pieces, understand that the first draft is just that – a first draft. To create a polished piece you’re truly proud of, you’ll need to think, write, edit, and revise.

Think you’ve got a good handle on rhetoric? Assess your knowledge [here](#).

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