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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

The 6-Point Rubrics **Decoded**

The official AP Lang essay rubric, translated into student language, with decision rules, what-earns-it and what-loses-it tables, annotated examples, and a self-scoring checklist. Use it before you write, and again every time you score a practice essay.

How to use this guide

Every AP Lang essay is scored 0–6 on three rows. The wording is dense, so this guide rewrites it as a set of questions you can answer about your own essay.

ROW	NAME	POINTS	THE QUESTION A READER ASKS
A	Thesis	0–1	Did the student take a defensible position (or, on Question 2, make a claim about the writer's choices)?
B	Evidence and Commentary	0–4	Is there specific evidence, and does the student explain how it supports a line of reasoning?
C	Sophistication	0–1	Does the argument show nuance, broader context, or consistently strong rhetorical control?

Rows are scored **independently**. A weak thesis does not automatically sink Row B, and a strong Row B does not guarantee Row C. Readers also score essays as drafts: they know you had about 40 minutes.

Row A: Thesis (0–1)

The decision rules in plain language

- The thesis can be one sentence or a few sentences close together, and it can appear **anywhere** in the essay. The introduction is traditional, not required.
- It must **take a position**. Listing pros and cons, or saying “there are many sides,” does not.

- It must be **defensible**: a reasonable person could argue it, and for synthesis the sources must offer at least minimal support.
- It may preview your line of reasoning, but it does not have to.
- You earn the point **even if the body of the essay does not support the thesis**. Row A measures only whether a defensible thesis exists.
- A statement of obvious fact is not a thesis.

What earns it and what loses it

QUESTION	THESIS THAT EARNS THE POINT	THESIS THAT DOES NOT
1 Synthesis	Takes a position on the issue and responds to the exact task	Restates the prompt; summarizes the issue; "Both sides have good points"
2 Rhetorical analysis	Makes a claim about how the writer's choices achieve the purpose	Describes the passage; repeats the purpose the prompt already gave; only names devices ("uses ethos, pathos, and logos")
3 Argument	Takes a clear position on the extent to which the claim is valid	Restates the claim; "It depends"; a vague or only inferred position

Annotated mini-examples

Question 2 (a commencement speech urging graduates to take risks).

Does not earn: "In her speech, the speaker uses many rhetorical strategies to convey her message about risk." This restates the prompt and names no choices.

Does not earn: "The speaker uses pathos, ethos, and logos to persuade graduates." Names labels, makes no claim about what any choice does.

Earns: "By opening with her own failed first venture and then shifting to a list of brief, imperative commands, the speaker moves graduates from sympathy for her failure to confidence in their own capacity to risk." This names concrete choices (a personal anecdote, a shift to imperatives) and a purpose.

Question 3 (a claim that failure teaches more than success).

Does not earn: "Failure can teach us a lot, but success can too." Equivocates.

Earns: "Failure teaches more than success only when the failure is examined; unexamined, it simply repeats." This is a position with a built-in qualification.

Question 1 (value of year-round schooling).

Does not earn: "Year-round schooling has advantages and disadvantages."

Earns: "Year-round schooling is worth adopting only if districts fund the added cooling, staffing, and family-support costs, because the sources show learning gains depend on those conditions."

Common Row A traps

1. Putting the thesis in the last sentence of a very long introduction, then changing position in the conclusion. Readers score what is there; a contradiction can make the thesis indefensible.

2. A thesis so broad that nobody could disagree ("Technology affects society").
3. On Question 2, a thesis about the speaker's *message* rather than the speaker's *choices*.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4)

Row B is where most points are won and lost, and it is where the scores of most students separate.

The two ingredients

Evidence is the specific material you cite: a quotation, a statistic, a named example, a described detail of the passage. "General" evidence ("the author uses vivid language") does not count as specific.

Commentary is *your* explanation of how the evidence supports your claim. It is not a restatement of the evidence. The Chief Reader Reports name the most common failure as **quote plus paraphrase**: a quotation followed by "This shows that..." and a rewording of the same idea.

A **line of reasoning** means your claims connect: each body paragraph builds on the previous one, and together they prove the thesis. A list of reasons that could be reordered is not a line of reasoning.

The ladder

POINTS	WHAT THE READER SEES (ALL THREE QUESTIONS)	WHAT YOU MUST ADD TO MOVE UP
0	Restates thesis, repeats given information, or (synthesis) references fewer than two sources	Anything specific
1	Some evidence (two sources on Q1), mostly general; commentary summarizes	Make evidence specific; say what it proves
2	Some specific evidence (three sources on Q1); commentary explains how some evidence relates to the argument, but no line of reasoning or the reasoning is faulty	Link claims so each builds on the last
3	Specific evidence supports all claims in a line of reasoning; commentary explains how some evidence supports it	Make commentary consistent for every piece of evidence
4	Same evidence standard; commentary consistently explains how the evidence supports the line of reasoning	(This is the top)

Additional requirements by question:

- **Question 1:** evidence from at least **three** sources for a 2, 3, or 4.

- **Question 2:** for a 3, commentary also explains how **at least one** rhetorical choice contributes to the writer's argument, purpose, or message; for a 4, it explains how **multiple** choices contribute. Multiple instances of the *same* choice count toward the 4th point only if you show each advancing the argument or purpose.
- **Question 3:** same ladder with no source counts; evidence comes from reading, experience, or observation.

A response **cannot earn the 4th point** if grammar and mechanics errors interfere with communication. Ordinary timed-writing slips do not count against you.

What earns it and what loses it

MOVE	EARNs ROW B POINTS	LOSES ROW B POINTS
Evidence	A short embedded quotation or precise reference, then analysis	A long quotation dropped in; "the author uses imagery" with no example
Commentary	"This comparison turns a statistic into a daily cost, so the audience feels the problem as personal."	"This shows that the problem is bad."
Organization	Paragraphs that develop: claim one sets up claim two	Parallel paragraphs, one source or device each, in any order
Synthesis	One source used to complicate or extend another	"Source A says... Source B says..."
Rhetorical analysis	Describes the choice, its effect on the audience, and why it serves the purpose	Names a device and says it "emphasizes his point"
Argument	An example whose relevance to the abstract claim you explain	A strong example never connected to the claim

Commentary that earns a 4 versus a 2

Passage context: In a eulogy, the speaker says of the deceased, "He never raised his voice, and yet the whole room leaned in."

A weak (about a 2) body paragraph:

The speaker says that the man never raised his voice and yet the whole room leaned in. This shows that the man was a quiet leader. This is a good way to describe him and it makes the audience feel sad.

Evidence is present and specific, but the commentary restates ("quiet leader"), then adds a generic effect ("makes the audience feel sad"). No link to a thesis. No line of reasoning.

A strong (about a 4) body paragraph:

The speaker builds her tribute on a paradox: "He never raised his voice, and yet the whole room leaned in." By pairing absence of force with total attention, she redefines authority for an audience of mourners who knew him as soft-spoken, so that what they might have remembered as a weakness becomes the proof of

his power. That redefinition prepares the turn in the next paragraph, where she asks them to carry on his gentleness as a form of strength.

The commentary says what the choice does (a paradox that redefines authority), for whom (mourners who knew him as soft-spoken), why (turn a weakness into strength), and how it connects to the next claim (sets up the call to carry on his gentleness). Every sentence says something the quotation does not.

The “so what” test

After each commentary sentence, ask “so what?” If the answer is still about the passage, keep going. Stop when the answer is your thesis.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1)

This is the hardest point and the most misunderstood. The reader must see sophistication of thought or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation **as part of the argument**, not as a single clever phrase.

The four pathways

You need only one, sustained through the essay.

PATHWAY	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
1. Nuance and tension	Consistently identify and explore complexities or tensions in the sources, passage, or question	Argument: “Optimism untempered by pessimism curdles into denial, yet pessimism untempered by optimism produces paralysis; Gorman’s claim is valid precisely because it requires both.”
2. Implications and limitations	Explain the implications or limits of an argument by placing it in a broader context	Synthesis: “The studies measure test scores, but the sources suggest the calendar’s larger effect is on families who rely on school for meals, which changes who benefits.”
3. Rhetorical choices that strengthen force	Make writing choices that consistently sharpen the argument	A thesis whose structure mirrors the parallelism of the passage it analyzes; topic sentences that each escalate the argument
4. Vivid, persuasive style	Sustain precise, vivid prose that advances the argument	Concrete verbs and images throughout, not a few flourishes

For Question 2, Row C is earned by (1) explaining the **significance of the writer’s choices given the rhetorical situation**, (2) explaining the **purpose or function of the passage’s complexities or tensions** (for example, an audience that honors a group yet holds a false story about it), or (3) a consistently vivid and persuasive style.

What does not earn it

- Sweeping generalizations offered as context (“Throughout history, people have always...”)

- Hinting at another view without exploring it
- A token counterargument paragraph dismissed in one sentence
- Examining each choice in isolation without relating the choices to one another (Question 2)
- Ornate vocabulary that does not make the argument sharper
- Writing the word “complex” or “nuanced”

Sophistication in practice

Earn Row B first. Sophistication is earned on top of strong evidence and commentary, usually by one deliberate move: define a key term with a distinction, or ask where your own claim would break.

Self-scoring checklist

Score each row for each essay. Be strict.

Row A - [] I can point to one or two sentences that take a position (Q2: that make a claim about the writer’s choices). - [] It is not a restatement of the prompt. - [] A reasonable person could argue against it.

Row B - [] Every body paragraph has at least one specific piece of evidence (Q1: three or more sources across the essay). - [] After each piece of evidence, I wrote at least one sentence that does not merely rephrase it. - [] My paragraphs build: I can say how paragraph 2 depends on paragraph 1. - [] My commentary links back to my thesis, not just to the paragraph topic. - [] (Q2) I explained more than one rhetorical choice and what each does for the purpose. - [] (Q1) I put at least two sources in conversation with each other.

Row C - [] I explored a tension or complexity throughout, not in one sentence. - [] Or I placed my argument in a specific broader context and stated an implication or limit. - [] My prose is precise, not ornate.

Scoring shortcut: If you cannot find a line of reasoning, cap Row B at 2. If your commentary is mostly restatement, cap it at 1 or 2. If you are unsure whether you earned Row C, you did not.

Glossary of rubric words

TERM	MEANING IN THE RUBRIC
Defensible	A reasonable person could argue for it and, on synthesis, the sources contain at least some support. Not an obvious fact, not an extreme or absurd claim.
Line of reasoning	A sequence of connected claims that together prove the thesis; each claim builds on the previous one.
Commentary	Your explanation of how evidence supports a claim and the line of reasoning. It says something the evidence does not say itself.
Specific evidence	Particular, named, quoted, or described material, not a general statement about the source or text.
Rhetorical choice	A concrete decision by the writer (an anecdote, a shift in tone, a repeated phrase, a comparison). Distinct from a device label like “ethos.”

TERM	MEANING IN THE RUBRIC
Sophistication	A nuanced argument, a broader context, or a consistently vivid style that is part of the argument itself.
Rhetorical situation	The exigence, audience, writer, purpose, context, and message that surround a text.
Qualify	Narrow a claim with modifiers, counterarguments, or alternative perspectives so it can be defended.
Interfere with communication	Mechanics errors frequent enough that the reader cannot follow your meaning; this blocks the 4th Row B point.

What Chief Readers say separates high scores

From the 2023, 2024, and 2025 Chief Reader Reports:

1. **Line of reasoning** is the single most-cited discriminator. Essays that offer “two or three claims, each tied to one source” stall at 2 in Row B.
2. **Quote plus paraphrase** is the most common commentary failure.
3. In synthesis, high scorers use sources in conversation (“While Source A emphasizes , **Source B reveals**”).
4. In rhetorical analysis, naming a device is not analysis; strong responses explain what the choice does, why the writer made it, and whether it works.
5. In argument, define the key abstract term before arguing, and weave complexity into the line of reasoning rather than adding a formulaic counterargument paragraph.

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