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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

The AP Lang Exam Explained

A complete description of the AP English Language and Composition exam: its format, the skills it tests, how it is scored, what the scores mean, and what happens on exam day. Read it once before you begin preparing and again a week before the test.

Why this document exists

Most students walk into the AP Lang exam knowing roughly that there are “some multiple choice and three essays.” That is not enough. The exam is built from a published blueprint, the *Course and Exam Description* (CED), and every question on it maps to one of 22 named skills. If you know the blueprint, you can study the right things in the right proportions and stop wasting time on what the exam no longer tests.

Everything below comes from College Board’s own materials, mainly the CED, the AP Central exam page, and the AP Students assessment page. Where a figure is an estimate rather than an official number, this document says so.

Part 1: The format

The whole exam in one table

SECTION	WHAT	TIME	WEIGHT
I	45 multiple-choice questions, 4 answer choices each (A–D)	60 minutes	45%
II	3 free-response essays	2 hours 15 minutes, including a 15-minute reading period	55%
Total		3 hours 15 minutes	100%

The exam is delivered entirely on a computer through the **Bluebook** app. You type your essays. There is no paper booklet, and you cannot flip ahead to see the essays while working on the multiple choice.

A short history, because it explains the current design

Before 2019 the exam had 52–55 multiple-choice questions with five answer choices, including questions about footnotes and citations, and three essays scored on a 9-point holistic scale. The **fall 2019 redesign** fixed the multiple-choice section at 45 questions, added the **writing questions** (revising a student draft), dropped the footnote questions, and replaced the 9-point essay scale with the **6-point analytic rubric** you will learn in *The 6-Point Rubrics Decoded*. In 2020 the pandemic exam was a single 45-minute rhetorical analysis essay taken online. Since 2021, College Board has released two sets of essay prompts each year. In **2025** the exam moved fully to Bluebook, and multiple-choice questions dropped from five choices to **four**.

Why this matters to you: old practice materials (and many prep books) still contain five-choice questions, footnote questions, and 9-point rubrics. Those are useful for reading practice but do not represent the exam you will take.

Section I: Multiple choice (45 questions, 60 minutes)

Section I has **five question sets**, each attached to a passage. Every passage opens with a short italicized note giving the author, date, genre, and audience.

Two Reading sets (23–25 questions total). These are published nonfiction: essays, speeches, letters, memoir, journalism, scientific and historical prose. Each set typically has 11–14 questions. Reading questions ask you to analyze “the rhetorical choices in nonfiction texts”: what a sentence or paragraph does, what the writer assumes about the audience, how the argument is organized, what a word means in context, how style creates tone.

Three Writing sets (20–22 questions total). These are “student drafts” with numbered sentences, written in an academic, argumentative register on topics like technology, the environment, history, or culture. The sets run roughly 7–9, 7–9, and 4–6 questions. Writing questions ask you to “read like a writer”: the stem states a goal (“The writer wants to add a transition that clarifies the relationship between sentences 9 and 10”) and you pick the revision that best achieves it.

Pacing comes to about **80 seconds per question**. There is **no guessing penalty**, so never leave a blank.

Section II: Free response (3 essays, 2 hours 15 minutes)

Section II opens with a **15-minute reading period**. It is meant for reading and annotating the six synthesis sources, but you may begin writing as soon as you like, and you may move among the three questions in any order until time runs out. The suggested pacing printed in the exam is 15 minutes of reading and planning plus 40 minutes of writing for Question 1, then 40 minutes each for Questions 2 and 3.

QUESTION	TYPE	WHAT YOU GET	WHAT YOU DO
1	Synthesis	A one-paragraph introduction to a public issue, then six sources (A–F), always including at least one visual (photo, cartoon, infographic) and at least one quantitative source (graph, table, chart)	Develop a position on the issue, using evidence from at least three sources

QUESTION	TYPE	WHAT YOU GET	WHAT YOU DO
2	Rhetorical analysis	An orienting paragraph (speaker, credentials, date, occasion, audience, purpose) and a nonfiction passage of about 600–800 words	Analyze the rhetorical choices the writer makes to achieve a stated purpose
3	Argument	A 2–4 sentence stimulus about a named person and a short quoted claim	Argue your position on the extent to which the claim is valid

Each question ends with a nearly identical bullet list of what your response should do: a thesis that presents a defensible position (or, for Question 2, that analyzes the writer’s rhetorical choices); evidence that supports your line of reasoning; explanation of how the evidence supports that line of reasoning; for Question 2 only, an understanding of the rhetorical situation; and appropriate grammar and punctuation.

The three essays are weighted **equally**: 6 points each, 18 points total.

In Bluebook, the clock turns red at five minutes remaining. The proctor gives no verbal time warnings.

Part 2: What the exam tests

The four Big Ideas

The course is organized around four Big Ideas, each with a Reading side and a Writing side. Odd-numbered skill categories are reading; even-numbered are writing.

BIG IDEA	CODE	CORE IDEA	READING CATEGORY	WRITING CATEGORY
Rhetorical Situation	RHS	Writers make choices based on the situation they write within	1	2
Claims and Evidence	CLE	Writers make claims, support them with evidence, and respond to other views	3	4
Reasoning and Organization	REO	Organization and integration of evidence guide a reader through a line of reasoning	5	6
Style	STL	The rhetorical situation informs stylistic choices	7	8

The 22 skills

Every multiple-choice question is tagged to exactly one of these codes, and the practice-exam answer keys in this suite tag each question the same way.

Category 1: Rhetorical Situation, Reading - 1.A Identify and describe the exigence, audience, writer, purpose, context, and message. - 1.B Explain how an argument shows understanding of an audience's beliefs, values, or needs.

Category 2: Rhetorical Situation, Writing - 2.A Write introductions and conclusions appropriate to purpose and context. - 2.B Demonstrate understanding of an audience's beliefs, values, or needs.

Category 3: Claims and Evidence, Reading - 3.A Identify and explain claims and evidence within an argument. - 3.B Identify and describe the overarching thesis and any indication it gives of the argument's structure. - 3.C Explain how claims are qualified through modifiers, counterarguments, and alternative perspectives.

Category 4: Claims and Evidence, Writing - 4.A Develop a paragraph with a claim and supporting evidence. - 4.B Write a thesis that requires proof or defense and may preview structure. - 4.C Qualify a claim using modifiers, counterarguments, or alternative perspectives.

Category 5: Reasoning and Organization, Reading - 5.A Describe the line of reasoning and explain whether it supports the thesis. - 5.B Explain how organization creates unity and coherence and reflects a line of reasoning. - 5.C Recognize and explain methods of development used to accomplish a purpose.

Category 6: Reasoning and Organization, Writing - 6.A Develop a line of reasoning and commentary that explains it throughout an argument. - 6.B Use transitional elements to guide the reader. - 6.C Use appropriate methods of development to advance an argument.

Category 7: Style, Reading - 7.A Explain how word choice, comparisons, and syntax contribute to tone or style. - 7.B Explain how writers create, combine, and place clauses to show relationships among ideas. - 7.C Explain how grammar and mechanics contribute to clarity and effectiveness.

Category 8: Style, Writing - 8.A Strategically use words, comparisons, and syntax to convey tone or style. - 8.B Write sentences that clearly convey ideas. - 8.C Use conventions of grammar and mechanics to communicate clearly.

Skill-category weighting in Section I

SKILL CATEGORY	SHARE OF SECTION I	APPROXIMATE QUESTIONS OUT OF 45
1 Rhetorical Situation, Reading	11–14%	5–6
2 Rhetorical Situation, Writing	11–14%	5–6
3 Claims and Evidence, Reading	13–16%	6–7
4 Claims and Evidence, Writing	11–14%	5–6
5 Reasoning and Organization, Reading	13–16%	6–7
6 Reasoning and Organization, Writing	11–14%	5–6

SKILL CATEGORY	SHARE OF SECTION I	APPROXIMATE QUESTIONS OUT OF 45
7 Style, Reading	11–14%	5–6
8 Style, Writing	11–14%	5–6

The practical lesson: the exam is remarkably balanced. No single skill dominates, so you cannot afford a blind spot. Claims-and-Evidence and Reasoning-and-Organization reading questions are weighted slightly more heavily than the rest.

What is no longer tested

Old-style questions about footnotes, pronoun antecedents (“the antecedent of ‘it’ in line 32 is...”), and naming the “rhetorical mode” of a passage are gone. The exam also does not reward memorizing device names. The CED is explicit that it tests your ability to **apply** concepts like diction, syntax, and audience, not to define them.

Part 3: The nine units

The CED divides the course into nine units. It numbers them but deliberately leaves the themes and titles to teachers, so your class may call Unit 3 “Education” or “Nature” or nothing at all. What is fixed is the **skill spiral**: each unit introduces a few skills and revisits earlier ones, and each unit ends with a **Progress Check** (multiple choice plus one essay) in AP Classroom.

UNIT	WHAT IT TEACHES	SKILLS EMPHASIZED	PROGRESS CHECK ESSAY
1	The components of the rhetorical situation; identifying claims and evidence; writing a paragraph with a claim and evidence	1.A, 3.A, 4.A	Rhetorical analysis
2	Audience beliefs, values, and needs; identifying and writing a thesis; selecting evidence	1.B, 2.B, 3.A, 4.A, 3.B, 4.B	Argument
3	Line of reasoning and commentary; methods of development (narration, cause-effect, comparison-contrast, definition, description); synthesizing sources	3.A, 4.A, 5.A, 6.A, 5.C, 6.C	Synthesis
4	Introductions and conclusions; a thesis that previews structure; more methods of development	1.A, 2.A, 3.B, 4.B, 5.C, 6.C	Rhetorical analysis

UNIT	WHAT IT TEACHES	SKILLS EMPHASIZED	PROGRESS CHECK ESSAY
5	Coherence: organization, transitions, unity; word choice and tone	5.A, 6.A, 5.B, 6.B, 7.A, 8.A	Argument
6	Source credibility and bias; revising a thesis after research; tone and style	3.A, 4.A, 3.B, 4.B, 7.A, 8.A	Synthesis
7	Qualifying claims (modifiers, counterargument, alternative perspectives); clause structure; punctuation and grammar for clarity	1.A, 2.A, 3.C, 4.C, 7.B, 8.B, 7.C, 8.C	Rhetorical analysis
8	Audience and style: comparisons an audience can grasp; diction that reveals bias; modifier placement; parenthetical elements; irony	1.B, 2.B, 7.A, 8.A, 7.B, 8.B	Argument
9	Joining the conversation: concession, rebuttal, refutation; transitions that introduce counterarguments; review targeted by Progress Check data	3.C, 4.C	Synthesis

Notice the rotation: synthesis essays appear in Progress Checks 3, 6, and 9; rhetorical analysis in 1, 4, and 7; argument in 2, 5, and 8. By the end of the year you will have written each essay type three times under Progress Check conditions, before any practice exams.

Two more facts from the CED worth knowing. First, grammar errors “typical of unrevised, timed writing” do not lower your essay score unless they are so frequent they interfere with communication. Second, the course expects about 140 class periods, roughly 15 per unit.

Part 4: How scoring works

Section I

Each correct answer earns one raw point. Wrong answers and blanks earn zero. There is no deduction for guessing. Your raw score (0–45) is then scaled to make up 45% of your composite.

Section II

Each essay is read by a trained AP reader (over 3,000 readers scored the 2025 exam) and scored against the **6-point analytic rubric**:

ROW	WHAT IT MEASURES	POINTS
A	Thesis: a defensible position (Question 1 and 3) or a claim about the writer's rhetorical choices (Question 2)	0–1
B	Evidence and Commentary: specific evidence supporting all claims in a line of reasoning, with commentary that consistently explains how the evidence supports it	0–4
C	Sophistication: a nuanced argument, a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation, or a consistently vivid and persuasive style	0–1

The *6-Point Rubrics Decoded* in this folder explains every row in student language.

Your three essay scores (0–18 total) are scaled to 55% of the composite.

The composite and the 1–5 score

College Board does **not** publish the formula that converts raw scores to the 1–5 scale, and the cut points shift slightly each year. The most common reconstruction (used in this suite's score calculator) is:

- Multiple-choice raw score $\times 1.5 \approx$ up to 67.5 points
- Essay total (0–18) $\times 4.58 \approx$ up to 82.5 points
- Composite $\approx$ 150 points

AP SCORE	APPROXIMATE SHARE OF COMPOSITE	ILLUSTRATIVE COMBINATION
5	about 70% and above	35–38 of 45 correct plus 5s or 6s on at least two essays
4	about 58–69%	26–32 correct plus 3s and 4s on each essay
3	about 43–57%	20–26 correct plus 3s on each essay
2	about 30–42%	
1	below about 30%	

Treat these bands as approximate. The 2025 administration appears to have recalibrated the standards: the share of students earning a 3 or higher jumped from 54.6% in 2024 to 74.3% in 2025, which means the effective cutoffs are now somewhat lower than older reconstructions suggest. Use the bands to track progress, not to predict your exact score.

Score distributions

YEAR	5	4	3	2	1	3 OR HIGHER
2025	13.4%	28.0%	32.8%	16.1%	9.7%	74.3%
2026 (preliminary)	15%	28%	32%	15%	10%	75%

Before 2025, roughly 55% of students scored a 3 or higher in a typical year, and about 10% earned a 5.

Essay averages

From the Chief Reader Reports, the mean essay scores (out of 6) have been:

YEAR (SET 1)	SYNTHESIS	RHETORICAL ANALYSIS	ARGUMENT
2023	3.65	3.58	3.51
2024	3.65	3.32	3.44
2025	3.45	3.30	3.64

The **rhetorical analysis** essay is consistently the lowest-scoring of the three. If you are deciding where to put extra practice time, that is the answer.

Part 5: What a 3, a 4, and a 5 look like in practice

These portraits are built from the composite reconstruction and from what Chief Reader Reports describe at each level. They are descriptions, not guarantees.

A 3

Multiple choice: about 20–26 correct. The student reads carefully but gets caught by half-right answers and runs short of time on the last set.

Essays: mostly 3s. Each essay has a defensible thesis (Row A earned) and uses specific evidence, but the commentary often summarizes ("This shows that...") instead of explaining, and body paragraphs could be reordered without changing the essay, so there is no real line of reasoning. Row B is a 2 or 3; Row C is not earned.

What moves this student to a 4: turning every "this shows" into a sentence that says what the evidence proves *for the thesis*, and arranging paragraphs so that each builds on the one before.

A 4

Multiple choice: about 26–32 correct. The student finishes on time, eliminates two choices quickly on most questions, and misses mainly on the hardest style and organization items.

Essays: 4s with an occasional 3 or 5. Theses are specific and often preview the structure. Evidence is specific and supports every claim. Commentary explains how at least some of the evidence supports the line of reasoning. In rhetorical analysis, the student explains how at least one choice contributes to the writer's purpose. Row B is a solid 3 or 4; Row C is sometimes earned.

What moves this student to a 5: consistency. Every piece of evidence gets explanatory commentary, not just most; the rhetorical analysis explains *multiple* choices and relates them to one another; the argument essay explores a tension inside the question instead of bolting on a counterargument paragraph.

A 5

Multiple choice: about 35 or more correct. The student reads once for thesis and tone shifts, answers with targeted re-reading, and treats the writing sets as fast points.

Essays: mostly 5s and 6s. The thesis takes a real position and names specific choices or reasons. Evidence is specific and well chosen; commentary consistently explains how it supports the line of reasoning, and body paragraphs develop one another. In synthesis, sources are put in conversation (one source complicates or extends another) rather than listed. The student earns Row C on at least one essay by exploring a genuine complexity or by situating the argument in a broader context. Prose is clear and controlled, with precise verbs rather than ornate vocabulary.

Part 6: Exam day

Logistics

- **Registration** happens through your school, usually in the fall, using your My AP account. Your school's AP coordinator sets the deadline.
- **The exam is administered in May** on the date College Board sets for AP English Language and Composition. Check the AP Students site for the current year's schedule.
- **Device.** You test on a school-managed device or your own laptop or tablet with Bluebook installed, depending on your school's policy. Download and open Bluebook before exam day; the app has a practice mode that lets you see exactly how the testing screen, timer, and tools work. Charge your device fully and bring the charger.
- **Arrive early.** Check-in takes time, and a late arrival may not be admitted.
- **Bring:** a government or school photo ID (if your school requires it), your fully charged device, pens or pencils for scratch work. Your proctor provides scratch paper.
- **Do not bring:** phones, smartwatches, or any device other than the one you are testing on. Food and drink are typically not allowed in the room except during the break.

Rules during the exam

- You may not return to Section I after it closes, and you may not look at Section II before the reading period begins.
- During the 15-minute reading period you may annotate on scratch paper and begin writing whenever you choose.
- You may work on the three essays in any order and move among them freely.
- Responses auto-submit when time ends. Anything you have typed is saved; anything still in your head is not.
- There are no verbal time warnings. The on-screen clock turns red at five minutes.
- Standard conduct rules apply: no talking, no sharing information, no leaving the room except as permitted by the proctor. Violations can lead to score cancellation.

Accommodations

If you have an approved College Board accommodation (extended time, breaks, a reader, and so on), it applies to the AP exam, but it must be approved in advance through your school's SSD coordinator. Do not assume a school 504 plan or IEP transfers automatically.

A test-day plan in six lines

1. Eat, charge, and arrive early.
2. Section I: read each passage once for thesis and tone shifts, then answer; read writing-set stems first; mark and move on after about 60 seconds on any single question; answer everything.
3. Reading period: label every synthesis source with its stance in a phrase; translate the quantitative source into one plain sentence; draft a thesis.
4. Write the essays in the order you planned in advance (many students write their strongest first). Spend 3–5 minutes planning each.
5. Watch the clock yourself. When it turns red, finish the sentence you are writing and make sure every essay has a thesis.
6. Walk out. Do not relitigate your answers.

Quick reference

QUESTION	ANSWER
How many multiple-choice questions?	45, with 4 choices each
How long is Section I?	60 minutes
How many essays?	3: synthesis, rhetorical analysis, argument
How long is Section II?	2 hours 15 minutes, including a 15-minute reading period
How is each essay scored?	0–6: Thesis 0–1, Evidence and Commentary 0–4, Sophistication 0–1
Is there a guessing penalty?	No
What percent is each section worth?	Section I 45%, Section II 55%
What app is the exam in?	Bluebook
Which essay scores lowest on average?	Rhetorical analysis

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