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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

Pacing, Reading Period, and Test-Day **Playbook**

This is your plan for exam day: minute-by-minute schedules for both sections, the order in which to write the essays, what to do when you fall behind, how to use the Bluebook tools, and a last-week and night-before routine. Print it, mark the plans you choose, and rehearse them in at least two timed practice sessions before the exam.

The Exam in One Table

ITEM	DETAILS
Delivery	Digital, in the Bluebook app; responses submit automatically
Total time	3 hours 15 minutes
Section I	45 multiple-choice questions, 60 minutes , 45% of score, four choices (A–D) , no guessing penalty
Section I makeup	5 sets: 2 Reading sets (23–25 questions) and 3 Writing sets (20–22 questions)
Section II	3 free-response essays, 2 hours 15 minutes including a 15-minute reading period , 55% of score
Essays	Q1 Synthesis, Q2 Rhetorical Analysis, Q3 Argument; each 0–6; equal weight

Part 1: Section I (Multiple Choice), Minute by Minute

You have about **80 seconds per question**. Plan your time by set, not by question.

The Standard Plan

CLOCK (ELAPSED)	SET	QUESTIONS	WHAT TO DO
0:00–12:00	Reading set 1	11–13	3 minutes to read the passage once; about 9 minutes for the questions
12:00–24:00	Reading set 2	11–13	Same
24:00–33:00	Writing set 1	7–9	60–90 seconds to skim the draft; about 45 seconds per question
33:00–42:00	Writing set 2	7–9	Same
42:00–50:00	Writing set 3	4–6	Shorter draft, shorter set
50:00–60:00	Review	all	Return to flagged items; confirm nothing is blank

The sets may appear in any order. Check at the start of the section how the sets are arranged, and adjust the clock times above accordingly. What stays constant is the **per-set budget**: Reading sets about 12 minutes each, Writing sets about 8–9 minutes each, and a 10-minute buffer.

The Alternative Plan (Writing First)

If dense, older prose slows you down, take the Writing sets first. They are faster and they build momentum.

CLOCK	SET	WHY
0:00–25:00	All three Writing sets	Bank time and points; aim to finish 3 minutes under budget
25:00–50:00	Both Reading sets	12–13 minutes each, with the banked time
50:00–60:00	Review	Flagged items

You can navigate between questions in Bluebook, so you may reorder sets. Decide on the plan in practice, not in the exam room.

Question-Level Rules

- Reading questions:** Read the passage once (3 minutes), then answer by returning to the lines the stem names. Predict an answer before looking at the choices. (See the *MCQ Reading Questions* guide.)
- Writing questions:** Read the **stem first**, then only the sentences you need. The correct answer is the one that accomplishes the stated goal and is clean. (See the *MCQ Writing Questions* guide.)
- 90-second ceiling:** If a question has not resolved in about 90 seconds, choose your best answer, flag it, and move on.
- Answer every question.** There is no penalty for wrong answers. Never leave a blank.

5. **Two-answer rule:** If you are down to two, recheck the stem word by word and check each clause of each choice. If you still cannot decide, pick the more specific, passage-anchored option and flag it.
6. **Do not change an answer** in review unless you can name a specific reason (a misread word, a missed clause). First instincts are right more often than panic edits.

What to Do If You Are Behind

SITUATION	MOVE
3 minutes over budget after Reading set 1	Cut your reading time on set 2 to 2:30 and skip the hardest 2 questions on first pass
5+ minutes over budget at the halfway mark	Switch to the Writing-first plan for the remainder; take the Writing sets now
5 minutes left and 8 unanswered	Fill every blank with your best guess immediately, then use any remaining time to check flagged items
One passage is miserable	Answer what you can (main idea, tone, purpose questions are often answerable from a skim), then guess the rest

Part 2: Section II (Free Response)

The Order of the Essays

You may write the essays in any order. The reading period at the start is meant for the synthesis sources, but you can begin writing at any time. Choose an order **before** exam day.

STRATEGY	ORDER	BEST FOR
Numeric	Q1, Q2, Q3	Students who need the structure and who do synthesis well
Strength first	Your strongest essay type first, then the next, then the weakest	Students who want to bank points and calm nerves
Argument first	Q3, then Q1 (reading period gets used later), then Q2	Students strong in argument who want fresh energy for sources
Rhetorical analysis early	Q2, Q3, Q1	Students whose Q2 scores are lowest; they do it while their mind is freshest

A caution: the 15-minute reading period is built into the section, so use it in a way that makes sense. If you plan to start with Q2 or Q3, spend the first minutes of the reading period reading the **synthesis sources**, then write whichever essay you chose first. Do not waste the reading period.

The 2023–2025 Chief Reader Reports show Q2 as the lowest-scoring question on average, so many teachers recommend putting it where you are freshest.

The Standard Plan (Numeric Order)

ELAPSED CLOCK	TASK	OUTPUT
0:00–1:00	Read Q1 prompt twice	Underline the verb and topic
1:00–10:00	Read and annotate sources A–F	One-phrase stance per source
10:00–15:00	Sort sources, draft thesis and line of reasoning	Thesis plus 3–4 claims, sources assigned
15:00–50:00	Write Q1	Intro, 3 body paragraphs, short conclusion
50:00–55:00	Review Q1; skim Q2 prompt	Fix citations; underline Q2 purpose
55:00–60:00	Q2: read and annotate	Chunks, shifts, patterns
60:00–63:00	Q2: plan	Thesis plus 3 topic sentences
63:00–93:00	Write Q2	Intro, 3 body paragraphs, short conclusion
93:00–95:00	Review Q2	Thesis present? Quotes accurate?
95:00–100:00	Q3: unpack and plan	Define term, position, 2–3 examples
100:00–130:00	Write Q3	Intro, 2–3 body paragraphs, short conclusion
130:00–135:00	Final review	Make sure every essay has a thesis and no essay is blank

Total: 135 minutes. Adjust by about 5 minutes in either direction. The point is that **each essay gets roughly 40 minutes door to door**.

Essay-by-Essay Targets

ESSAY	READ	PLAN	WRITE	REVIEW	WORDS
Q1 Synthesis	10	5	35–40	2–3	500–700
Q2 Rhetorical analysis	4–5	2–3	30	2	500–700
Q3 Argument	1–2	3–4	30	2	500–700

Priorities Inside Each Essay

Writing under time pressure requires a hierarchy.

1. **Thesis** (Row A): Never skip it. It is one point on every essay, and it organizes everything else.
2. **Body paragraphs with commentary** (Row B, up to 4 points): Three solid paragraphs beat four thin ones.
3. **Conclusion**: Brief, if time. Add significance, do not restate.
4. **Sophistication** (Row C): Comes from a tension or limit explored in the body; do not leave it for a last-minute sentence.

If you are running out of time in an essay: write the thesis and the strongest body paragraph first, then fill in the rest. A thesis plus two well-developed paragraphs usually outscores a four-paragraph essay with no commentary.

What to Do If You Are Behind in Section II

SITUATION	MOVE
You are 5 minutes over on Q1	Cut the conclusion; shorten the Q2 annotation to 3 minutes
You have 12 minutes for Q3 and nothing written	Write: a 2-sentence intro with a thesis; one body paragraph with a definition, an example, and commentary; one more short paragraph if time remains
You blank on Q3	Use the prompt's own language: define the key term, choose a middle position ("valid when...", not when..."), and use one example you know well (history, literature, personal)
You blank on Q2	Write what the speaker does in each chunk: "begins by...", then shifts to..., ends by..." and then say how each move serves the stated purpose
1 minute left	Add a one-sentence conclusion, or fix any incomplete sentence

Part 3: Using Bluebook

Practice with the real app well before exam day. Tools in the testing interface generally include the following; **confirm the exact list and how each works in your own Bluebook practice session**, since interface details can change.

TOOL	HOW TO USE IT
Mark for Review (flag)	Use for any question you answered tentatively or skipped. A review screen lists flagged items.
Answer eliminator	Cross out choices you have ruled out so that the remaining ones stand out.
Highlights and notes	Highlight a thesis, a shift, or a phrase you may quote; use the notes area to jot a stance phrase or outline.
Timer	Check it at each set boundary. It turns red at five minutes. You may be able to hide it, but you should not hide it unless you have a plan for checking the time.
Question navigation	Lets you move between questions and sets; use it to reorder or to return to flags.

Essay Typing Routine

- Type your **outline in the notes box** or a text area before you write: thesis, topic sentences, example names.
- Write the **thesis and topic sentences first** if you tend to run out of time, then fill in the body paragraphs.
- Check your **typing speed** in practice. If you type slowly, plan for shorter, denser paragraphs.
- Use a simple paragraph structure. **Skip the fancy formatting**; Bluebook may not preserve it.
- Reread your thesis once before you start the body, so your first topic sentence advances it.
- Leave time to scan for words dropped in typing (a missing “not” can reverse your meaning).

Technology Checklist

- ☐ Device charged and plugged in; Bluebook updated and tested.
- ☐ Practice test completed in the app (do this at least once before exam day).
- ☐ Admission ticket and ID ready, if your school requires them.
- ☐ Backup plan known: check with your coordinator about what happens if your device fails.

For the official digital-testing guidance, use the College Board’s pages above and your school’s AP coordinator.

Part 4: The Last Week

DAY	FOCUS	TASKS
7 days out	Diagnose	Take one full timed Section I (45 questions, 60 minutes). Sort every miss by type and by distractor pattern.
6 days out	Reading MCQ	Redo missed Reading types with the <i>MCQ Reading Questions</i> guide. Do one timed Reading set (12 minutes).
5 days out	Writing MCQ	Redo missed Writing types with the <i>MCQ Writing Questions</i> guide. One timed Writing set (8 minutes).
4 days out	Synthesis	One timed Q1 (15 minutes reading plus 40 writing), or a plan-only drill on two prompts. Review the Row B ladder.
3 days out	Rhetorical analysis	One timed Q2. Rewrite the weakest paragraph with the choice-effect-purpose chain.
2 days out	Argument	One timed Q3. Review your 8–10 best examples and their uses.
1 day out	Light review	Skim your miss log, thesis templates, and this playbook. Stop studying early.
Exam day	Execute	Follow the plan.

Other tips for the final week:

- Do **plan-only drills** (5 minutes each) for several prompts: write only the thesis and topic sentences. They teach speed without the full time cost.
- Review the common pitfalls for the essays you find hardest.
- Keep your sleep schedule steady. Fatigue costs more points than one more practice set can earn.
- Do not start new systems. Use the methods you have already practiced.

Part 5: The Night Before

Do

- Eat a normal dinner; hydrate.
- Skim your one-page cheat sheet (see below) for 10–15 minutes at most.
- Pack: device and charger, ID, admission ticket (if required), pencils or pens for scratch work if allowed, water, a snack for the break, a watch if permitted.
- Plan your morning: wake time, breakfast, travel buffer.
- Go to bed at a normal hour.

Don't

- Take a full practice test.
- Cram vocabulary lists.
- Try a new strategy.
- Stay up late for "one more essay."

The One-Page Cheat Sheet (Make Your Own)

Write these on a single page and read it once the night before:

1. **MCQ Reading**: predict first, eliminate by pattern, tie-breakers (specific, moderate, consistent).
2. **MCQ Writing**: stem first; goal, fit, correctness.
3. **Synthesis**: stance phrase for each source; thesis with a position; two sources in most paragraphs; commentary adds an idea.
4. **Rhetorical analysis**: SPACE first; choices not devices; choice, effect, purpose; chronological.
5. **Argument**: define the term; qualified position; specific, causal examples; concession inside the argument.
6. **Time**: 80 seconds per MCQ; 40 minutes per essay; thesis first.

Part 6: Exam Morning and Break

- Eat something with protein; avoid heavy sugar.
- Arrive early, or log in early if your school's setup requires it.
- During the first minute of Section I, check how the sets are arranged and pick your plan.
- Between sections, take the break: stretch, drink water, **do not review**. Reviewing in the break raises anxiety more than it raises scores.
- If a section goes badly, reset. Each question and each essay is scored independently; a bad passage does not ruin the next one.

Part 7: Staying Calm

MOMENT	MOVE
Panic at a hard passage	Breathe; read the first and last paragraphs; answer the main-idea and tone questions; guess the rest
Blank on an essay	Write the prompt's key term and your best definition of it; the thesis often follows
Realize you misread something	Do not rewrite; add a sentence of clarification or let the commentary correct it
Hand cramps or fatigue	Pause for ten seconds; roll your wrists; resume
Time pressure	Return to the hierarchy: thesis, then best paragraph, then the rest

Part 8: After the Exam

- Scores are released in July through your College Board account. College Board does not publish a raw-to-AP conversion, so any “predicted score” you calculate from practice is approximate; reconstructions place a 5 at roughly 70 percent of the composite and a 3 at roughly 43 percent, but standards change from year to year (the share of students earning 3 or higher was about 74 percent in 2025).
- Whatever your result, the skills (building a claim, supporting it, explaining how evidence works) are the ones you will use in every college writing class.

Quick Reference: Time Budgets

TASK	BUDGET
One MCQ	80 seconds (ceiling 90)
Reading set	12 minutes
Writing set	8–9 minutes
Section I review	10 minutes
Q1 total	55 minutes (15 read/plan plus 40 write)
Q2 total	40 minutes
Q3 total	40 minutes
Essay length	500–700 words

Self-Assessment: Choose Your Plans

Fill this in during practice. After two timed sessions, the plan you can execute calmly is your plan.

DECISION	MY CHOICE
Section I plan (Standard or Writing-first)	_____
Essay order	_____
Q1 reading-period allocation (read / plan)	_____
Hard time cap for any MCQ	_____
My "if behind" move for Section I	_____
My "if behind" move for Section II	_____
Three things on my cheat sheet	_____

Answer Key

This document contains no practice items. Use these checks instead.

- **Plan check:** Your Section I plan should add to 60 minutes, and your Section II plan to 135 minutes including the reading period.
- **Order check:** Whichever essay order you choose, you should be able to say why in one sentence.
- **Official facts check:** Exam format, timing, and delivery details above are from the College Board pages cited at the top of this guide. Confirm any change in the current year’s AP Students page before test day.

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