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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

The Argument Essay Step by Step

This guide teaches you to write Question 3 of the AP English Language and Composition exam, the argument essay. You will learn to unpack the stimulus, define abstract terms, take an "extent to which" position, qualify it, and build a line of reasoning from evidence you already know. It includes a bank of 40 ready examples to learn, four line-of-reasoning structures, a worked example (plan, a 6-point essay with commentary, and a 3-point essay with what went wrong), and five practice prompts with planning notes in the Answer Key.

What Question 3 Is

Question 3 gives you a short stimulus: two to four sentences that introduce a named person (a writer, public figure, scientist, athlete) and a short claim. The task since 2019 is uniform: **"Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which [X]'s claim about [topic] is valid."** There are no sources. Evidence comes from "your reading, experience, or observations."

Recent stimuli have been contemporary, diverse public figures with a maxim, for example Naomi Osaka on being present, Amanda Gorman on optimism "in conversation with" pessimism, Mae Jemison on limited imaginations. The topics are abstract and value-laden: adversity, perfection, certainty and doubt, ownership, optimism. Accessible to a teenager, arguable by reasonable people.

It is one of three essays, each scored 0–6 and each one-third of the free-response section. Suggested time is about 40 minutes.

The Rubric in Plain Language

ROW	POINTS	WHAT EARNS IT
A: Thesis	0–1	A defensible position responding to the prompt. Restating the prompt, "there are many sides," or a vague position earns 0.
B: Evidence and Commentary	0–4	Specific evidence supporting all claims in a line of reasoning, with commentary that explains how the evidence supports the claims. Consistent explanation earns the 4.

ROW	POINTS	WHAT EARNS IT
C: Sophistication	0–1	A nuanced argument exploring complexities or tensions; implications or limitations in a broader context; or consistently vivid, purposeful style.

What Chief Readers Say Separates High Scores

From the 2023–2025 Chief Reader Reports:

- **Define the abstract term** before arguing about it. A thesis such as “Living in the moment is extremely valid” is undeveloped.
- Students rarely lack examples; they fail to explain the **relevance of the example to the abstract question**.
- Personal anecdotes work when they explain **specific impact and context**; hypotheticals work when grounded in observations about human nature; history and literature work when the **causal relationship** is specific.
- Avoid **binary framing** and **formulaic counterargument paragraphs**. Address complexity **inside** the line of reasoning.
- Do not conflate adjacent concepts (a photo album is not a selfie).
- Token objections dismissed in one sentence do not earn sophistication.

Step 1: Unpack the Stimulus (2 minutes)

Read the stimulus twice, slowly. Then answer four questions in the margin.

1. **What exactly is the claim?** Rewrite it in your own words as a plain sentence. “We trust experts more when they admit uncertainty.”
2. **What is the key abstract term?** (*trust, expertise, uncertainty*) Circle it.
3. **What does the claim assume?** (That admitting limits is a signal of reliability; that audiences notice.)
4. **What are its limits?** When might it be false? (When uncertainty is feared; when experts are wrong; when audiences want certainty.)

Note the prompt’s exact wording: “the **extent to which** ... claim about ... is valid.” You are not choosing true or false; you are deciding **how far** and **under what conditions** the claim holds. Also note what the claim is *about*: the prompt says “claim about **trust in experts**,” not “experts in general.” Responding to a neighboring topic is a common way to lose focus.

Step 2: Define the Terms

The Chief Reader’s advice, repeated every year, is to define the key term. A definition is not a dictionary quote. It is a **choice about what the word means in this argument**, and the choice shapes your whole essay.

TERM IN A PROMPT	WEAK DEFINITION	STRONG, ARGUABLE DEFINITION
<i>Being present</i>	“Living in the moment”	Attention to what is happening now without abandoning memory and planning

TERM IN A PROMPT	WEAK DEFINITION	STRONG, ARGUABLE DEFINITION
<i>Optimism</i>	"Being positive"	A disciplined belief that effort can change outcomes, different from denial
<i>Perfection</i>	"Having no flaws"	A standard used as a direction, not a destination
<i>Trust</i>	"Believing someone"	Willingness to rely on someone's judgment when you cannot check it yourself
<i>Limited imaginations</i>	"Close-minded people"	Other people's assumptions about what you can do, which you may absorb

Two moves to try:

- **Distinguish:** separate two things people confuse ("optimism" vs. "denial"; "confidence" vs. "certainty"). Distinctions are a reliable source of sophistication.
- **Narrow:** say which kind of the thing you are discussing ("trust in *scientific* experts under *uncertainty*").

Put your definition into the introduction, ideally inside the thesis or the sentence before it.

Step 3: Take an "Extent To Which" Position

Your thesis chooses a point on a spectrum.

POSITION	SAMPLE FRAME
Largely valid	"[Claim] is largely valid, because , <i>though it fails when</i> ."
Valid only under conditions	"[Claim] holds only when ; <i>otherwise</i> ."
Largely invalid	"[Claim] overstates , <i>because</i> ."
Valid, but for a different reason	"[Claim] is right in effect, but the cause is , <i>not</i> ."

Positions in the middle are fine, and often richer, as long as they are **specific**. "To some extent valid" is not a thesis. "Valid when the expert explains the limits of her knowledge, and not otherwise" is.

Qualification

To qualify is to narrow a claim with **conditions** (*when, if, unless, only where*) or **modifiers** (*often, typically, most, in many cases*). It is how you make a claim defensible rather than hedged. Compare:

- *Hedged:* "Admitting uncertainty can sometimes be good or bad."
- *Qualified:* "Admitting uncertainty builds trust when it comes with evidence of competence, and erodes it when it appears in place of competence."

Qualified claims convert objections into parts of your argument.

The Thesis Test (Row A)

THESIS	VERDICT
"This claim is very valid."	0: undefined, no reason
"There are good and bad sides to admitting uncertainty."	0: no position
"Admitting uncertainty builds trust only when paired with demonstrated competence."	1: defensible, specific

Step 4: Build an Evidence Bank (Learn 40 Examples)

You will not know the topic in advance, but you can know a lot of **flexible examples**. The method: prepare 2–3 examples in each of five categories, learn them to the level of 3–4 accurate specifics each, and practice bending each to different abstract questions. Several teacher systems use this idea (CHORES, RELISH, "Q3 database"); this guide uses five categories: **History, Literature, Science, Current Events, and Personal**.

Rules for using any example:

1. Use **specific** details (names, dates, causes) and only the ones you are sure of.
2. Explain the **causal relationship** between the example and the claim.
3. Match the example to the **exact term** in the prompt.
4. Never let the example **be** the argument; commentary does the work.
5. Show how a single example can support **different positions** depending on the question you ask of it.

History (8)

#	EXAMPLE	KEY SPECIFICS	CAN SUPPORT
1	Montgomery bus boycott (1955–56)	About 381 days; organized by local leaders including Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council, with Martin Luther King Jr. as spokesman; ended after a Supreme Court ruling that bus segregation was unconstitutional	collective action vs. individual voice; sacrifice; organization over spontaneity; courage
2	Apollo program	Apollo 1 fire (1967) killed three astronauts; spacecraft redesigned; Apollo 11 landed in 1969	failure as teacher; risk; perfection; ambition
3	Marshall Plan (1948–1952)	U.S. aid to rebuild Western Europe after World War II	generosity and self-interest; cooperation; helping others
4	Lincoln's cabinet of rivals	Lincoln appointed political opponents (Seward, Chase, Bates) to his cabinet	disagreement and leadership; humility; dissent

#	EXAMPLE	KEY SPECIFICS	CAN SUPPORT
5	Women's suffrage in the U.S.	Seneca Falls (1848) to the 19th Amendment (1920); about 72 years	persistence; incremental change; limits of optimism
6	Printing press	Gutenberg's movable type, about 1450	technology and knowledge; democratization; unintended consequences
7	Japanese American incarceration (1942)	Executive Order 9066; about 120,000 people removed from West Coast; later formal government apology and redress (1988)	fear vs. rights; conformity; justice and delay
8	Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)	Wall built 1961; opened November 1989; sudden after long pressure	change that seems impossible; patience; collective voices

Literature (8)

#	EXAMPLE	KEY SPECIFICS	CAN SUPPORT
9	<i>The Great Gatsby</i> (Fitzgerald, 1925)	Gatsby reinvents himself to win Daisy; his dream is tied to a past that cannot be recovered	ambition; illusion; the American Dream; nostalgia
10	<i>Antigone</i> (Sophocles)	Antigone defies Creon's law to bury her brother; Creon's pride leads to disaster	law vs. conscience; pride; disobedience
11	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (Twain, 1884)	Huck decides to help Jim escape although his society says it is wrong ("All right, then, I'll go to hell")	conscience vs. conformity; moral growth
12	<i>Frankenstein</i> (Shelley, 1818)	Victor creates life and abandons it; consequences follow	responsibility; ambition without care; science and ethics
13	<i>Hamlet</i> (Shakespeare)	Hamlet's delay and doubt; consequences of inaction	certainty vs. doubt; overthinking
14	<i>The Scarlet Letter</i> (Hawthorne, 1850)	Hester wears the letter publicly; Dimmesdale hides his sin and suffers	honesty vs. concealment; public shame; guilt
15	<i>1984</i> (Orwell, 1949)	The Party controls language and history; Winston's rebellion fails	truth; power; conformity; surveillance

#	EXAMPLE	KEY SPECIFICS	CAN SUPPORT
16	<i>Lord of the Flies</i> (Golding, 1954)	Boys stranded on an island descend into violence	human nature; civilization; authority

Science (8)

#	EXAMPLE	KEY SPECIFICS	CAN SUPPORT
17	Ignaz Semmelweis (1840s)	A Vienna doctor required handwashing in a maternity ward and mortality fell sharply; many colleagues rejected his explanation	expertise vs. evidence; resistance to change; truth ignored
18	Penicillin	Alexander Fleming noticed in 1928 that mold on a culture killed bacteria; others developed it into a drug years later	chance and preparation; curiosity; collaboration
19	Challenger disaster (1986)	Space shuttle exploded 73 seconds after launch; engineers had warned that cold would compromise the O-ring seals; managers proceeded	speaking up; groupthink; pressure vs. caution
20	Milgram obedience experiments (1960s)	Many participants continued to administer what they believed were painful shocks when instructed by an authority	obedience; responsibility; authority
21	Asch conformity experiments (1950s)	Participants often gave an obviously wrong answer to match a group	conformity; peer pressure; courage to differ
22	Galileo and the telescope	Galileo's observations of Jupiter's moons (1610) supported a Sun-centered model; he was put on trial by the Church in 1633	dissent; evidence vs. authority
23	Dweck's growth mindset research	Studies suggest praising effort rather than ability can change how students respond to difficulty; later replications show smaller or mixed effects	effort vs. talent; and the limits of simple claims

#	EXAMPLE	KEY SPECIFICS	CAN SUPPORT
24	The “marshmallow test”	Children who waited for a second marshmallow later did somewhat better in some measures; later research suggests family background explains much of the pattern	self-control; and caution about oversimple causes

Current Events (8)

#	EXAMPLE	KEY SPECIFICS	CAN SUPPORT
25	Public health guidance during COVID-19 (2020)	Guidance on masks changed as evidence developed; trust depended partly on whether officials explained the changes	trust; expertise; admitting uncertainty
26	Rapid vaccine development	COVID-19 vaccines authorized within about a year, building on earlier research	urgency and innovation; collaboration
27	Simone Biles at the Tokyo Olympics (2021)	The gymnast withdrew from several events citing mental health and safety concerns	perfection; courage; pressure; knowing limits
28	Naomi Osaka and the French Open (2021)	She withdrew, citing her mental health, and later spoke publicly about it	pressure; privacy; honesty
29	March for Our Lives (2018)	Students after the Parkland shooting organized national demonstrations	young voices; collective action; persistence
30	Social media and attention	Platforms built around notifications and scrolling; debates over effects on teenagers' wellbeing	distraction; connection; self-presentation
31	AI tools in classrooms	Schools debate whether chatbots help learning or replace it	shortcuts vs. struggle; technology and effort
32	Remote learning in 2020–21	Many students lost ground; others thrived with flexibility	adaptation; inequality; resilience

Personal (8)

Personal evidence is allowed and can be powerful, but the Chief Reader reports say it works only when it explains **specific impact and context** and is connected to the **abstract question**. Treat these as templates. Replace the details with real ones from your life.

#	TEMPLATE	CAN SUPPORT
33	A failed audition, tryout, or competition and what you changed afterward	failure as teacher; effort; perfection
34	A time you disagreed with your group and had to decide whether to speak	conformity; courage; leadership
35	A skill you learned slowly (an instrument, a sport, a language) and what the plateau taught you	patience; growth; persistence
36	A job or volunteer role where you saw a system work or fail	responsibility; teamwork; expertise
37	A family story about immigration, loss, or a move	resilience; belonging; identity
38	A time you relied on a mentor or coach who admitted not knowing the answer	trust; humility; learning
39	A moment when you realized you had judged someone unfairly	assumption; empathy; first impressions
40	A time when you tried to be perfect and what it cost you	perfection; anxiety; priorities

How to Use an Example: Specific, Causal, Relevant

Compare two uses of the same example.

- **Weak:** "In *Gatsby*, Gatsby wanted Daisy. This shows that ambition can be good and bad."
- **Strong:** "Gatsby's ambition is admirable in its energy, since he remakes himself from a poor farm boy into a wealthy host, but it is aimed at recovering a past that Daisy has outgrown, so the same determination that built his fortune blinds him to the fact that the person he wants no longer exists."

The strong version names a **specific action**, explains the **cause** of the outcome, and answers a **question about the abstract term**.

Step 5: Choose a Line of Reasoning

A line of reasoning is a sequence of claims in which **each builds on the one before**. Four structures work well on the exam.

1. Classical (Confirmation and Refutation)

Introduce the issue → state the thesis → give the strongest reasons → address and answer the best objection → conclude with significance.

Use when: you hold a firm position and the best objection is serious.

2. Rogerian

State the issue fairly → give the opposing view in its strongest form → say where it is valid → present your position → say where it is valid and how the two views can be reconciled.

Use when: the topic is a real disagreement between two values (security vs. freedom; honesty vs. kindness).

3. Toulmin

ELEMENT	QUESTION IT ANSWERS
Claim	What am I arguing?
Grounds	What evidence supports it?
Warrant	Why does the evidence support the claim?
Backing	What supports the warrant?
Qualifier	How certain am I? (<i>usually, often, in most cases</i>)
Rebuttal	When would this not hold?

Use when: you want counterargument **inside** paragraphs, which the Chief Reader prefers to a separate token paragraph. The warrant and qualifier are where sophistication lives.

4. "Although / Because"

Thesis: "**Although** [concession], [claim] **because** [reason 1] and [reason 2]." Each body paragraph develops one reason, and the concession is handled in the paragraph where it matters most.

Use when: you need a quick, reliable shape under time pressure.

A Fifth Pattern: Complication

Paragraph 1: the claim is valid in one domain. Paragraph 2: it fails in a second domain. Paragraph 3: a principle explains the difference. This is the "valid under conditions" thesis in essay form.

Step 6: Counterargument and Concession Done Well

The 2025 Chief Reader Report discourages formulaic counterargument paragraphs ("Some people say..., but I disagree"). Instead:

1. **State the objection at full strength.** The best objection, not a strawman.
2. **Concede what is true in it.** ("Admittedly, certainty can comfort a frightened audience.")
3. **Redirect with a reason.** Show where the objection stops applying, or what it overlooks.

4. **Make the response part of your argument.** The reply should refine the thesis.

Sentence frames (adapted from *They Say / I Say*, Graff and Birkenstein):

- "It is true that ; **however, this holds only when .**"
- "Critics might point to , **and they would be right that .** But the example overlooks ____."
- "Though I concede that , **I still insist that** because ____."
- "This objection depends on assuming , **which fails when .**"

Put at least one concession **inside** a body paragraph rather than in a final bolt-on.

Step 7: Sophistication Moves

Sophistication is one point, earned on top of strong evidence and commentary, and must be part of the argument rather than a single phrase. Reliable moves:

MOVE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
Distinguish	Separate two things the claim blends ("optimism vs. denial").
Define with nuance	Offer a specific meaning of the key term, and use it consistently.
Explore a tension	Show where two true things pull against each other ("trust requires both humility and competence").
Situate in a broader context	Connect the claim to a larger pattern (history, ethics, generations) without sweeping generalization.
Acknowledge limits	State where your own position stops being true.
Advance topic sentences	Make each topic sentence add something new, not repeat the thesis.
Choose precise verbs	Prefer vivid, accurate verbs to ornate vocabulary.

Saying the issue is "complex" is not showing complexity. Show it by letting two ideas collide and then resolving or holding the collision.

Step 8: Plan in Five Minutes

MINUTES	TASK
0:00–1:00	Unpack the stimulus: claim, key term, assumption, limit
1:00–2:00	Define the term and choose a position on the spectrum
2:00–4:00	Choose 2–3 examples from your bank; jot the claim each will support
4:00–5:00	Order the claims so each builds; write the thesis

Then write for about 30 minutes: intro (3–4 sentences), 2–3 body paragraphs with 2 pieces of evidence each, a short conclusion. Target 500–700 words.

Full Worked Example

The Prompt

The following prompt was written for this guide. The speaker and the quotation are fictional.

In a 2019 commencement address, the fictional science writer Dr. Maren Ellery told graduates: “We trust expertise most when it admits what it does not know.” Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which Ellery’s claim about trust and expertise is valid.

In your response you should do the following: respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible position; provide evidence to support your line of reasoning; explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning; use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Step 1: Unpack

- **Claim in plain words:** People rely on experts more when the experts say what they don’t know.
- **Key terms:** *trust, expertise, admits what it does not know.*
- **Assumption:** that audiences notice and reward honesty about limits.
- **Limits:** audiences in crisis may want certainty; an expert who admits too much may seem incompetent; a confident expert who is right deserves trust too.

Step 2: Define and Position

- **Define:** *Trust* = willingness to act on someone’s judgment when I can’t check it myself. *Admitting limits* = specifying what is known, what is not, and what would change the answer.
- **Distinction:** honest uncertainty (specific, with evidence of competence) vs. vagueness (general, instead of competence).
- **Position:** largely valid, with a condition. Admitting limits builds trust **when it shows command of the subject**; it does not build trust when it replaces command.

Step 3: Evidence Choices

CLAIM	EXAMPLE	NUMBER FROM BANK
Ignoring admitted limits leads to disaster	Challenger	19
Explaining changed guidance builds or loses trust	COVID guidance	25
Certainty can be right and uncertainty can hold back truth	Semmelweis	17
Personal: a coach/teacher who said “I don’t know, let’s find out”	personal template	38

Step 4: Thesis and Line of Reasoning

Thesis: *Ellery is largely right, because experts who name the limits of their knowledge give audiences the information they need to trust them, but this holds only when the admission is paired with demonstrated competence; honest uncertainty without command of the subject, or confidence that happens to be correct, shows that trust follows reliability more than humility.*

Line of reasoning

1. Honest limits are what make expertise usable (Challenger: when limits were ignored, disaster).
2. Trust grows when experts explain changes in their conclusions (COVID guidance), which is admitting limits in action.
3. But humility alone is not enough; Semmelweis was certain and right, so the claim must be qualified.
4. Personal example confirms: the teacher's "I don't know" built trust because she then showed how to find out.

Step 5: The 6-Point Essay with Commentary

Commentary is in brackets for study. Omit it on the exam.

On the morning of January 28, 1986, engineers who had warned that cold weather could cripple the shuttle *Challenger's* O-ring seals watched managers decide the risk was acceptable, and seventy-three seconds after launch the shuttle broke apart. That disaster, in which expert doubt was heard and discounted, is one reason Dr. Maren Ellery's claim that "we trust expertise most when it admits what it does not know" deserves serious weight. Ellery is largely right, because experts who name the limits of their knowledge give audiences the information they need to rely on them; but the claim holds only when the admission is paired with demonstrated competence, which suggests that what earns trust is reliability, and humility is only one way of showing it.

Commentary: *The opening uses a specific, accurate example to enter the topic and to point at the claim. The thesis takes a clear position ("largely right"), gives a reason, adds a condition, and defines the underlying standard (reliability). It does more than agree or disagree. Row A: earned.*

Admitting limits matters because experts' conclusions are only as useful as the audience's ability to judge how far to rely on them. At NASA in 1986, engineers at the contractor who built the boosters recommended against launching in unusually cold temperatures, because they could not show the seals would hold; the managers, who preferred certainty, treated the absence of proof of failure as proof of safety. The tragedy shows the cost of a culture in which doubt is discouraged: an expert's "I don't know if this is safe" is not weakness but data, and a system that cannot hear it loses its most important warning. This is why the audience of an expert, whether a public agency or a family doctor, trusts most the one who says exactly where the knowledge stops, since those boundaries tell the audience where to be careful.

Commentary: *Evidence is specific (engineers' recommendation, cold, seals, managers' reasoning). The commentary does the real work: it explains why admission of limits is "data" and generalizes to other audiences. It ties directly to the key term (trust) and to the definition of "admitting limits." Not summary: the explanatory sentences add ideas that the evidence does not already state.*

The same logic explains why trust is built or lost in how experts handle changing conclusions. In spring 2020, public health guidance about masks shifted as evidence about how the virus spread accumulated. Where officials explained that the guidance had changed because the evidence had, and said what they still did not know, many listeners accepted the revision as science working; where the change was presented without explanation, it fed suspicion that experts had been hiding something. In both cases the facts were the same, and the difference lay in whether the experts admitted that their earlier position had rested on incomplete knowledge. That admission turned a reversal, which could look like incompetence, into a demonstration of the very honesty Ellery describes.

Commentary: *The topic sentence builds on paragraph 2 ("the same logic explains..."). The writer is careful not to overclaim ("many listeners," "where... where..."), which is itself a qualification. The paragraph compares two outcomes with the same facts, isolating the variable (admission), which is an actual causal argument and not only an illustration. Real-world accuracy: the guidance did change, and public-communication research supports the role of explanation.*

Yet the claim cannot be accepted without qualification, because admitting ignorance does not by itself make anyone trustworthy. In 1847, the Viennese physician Ignaz Semmelweis showed that requiring doctors to wash their hands with a chlorine solution sharply reduced deaths on a maternity ward. He was certain of his results, and the evidence supported his certainty; many of his colleagues, who could have claimed that the cause of the disease was still uncertain, rejected him. Here certainty was correct and the expert's critics were the ones comfortable with doubt. The case does not refute Ellery, but it narrows him: an audience that rewards every confession of uncertainty will sometimes reward the wrong people. What the sources of trust in Challenger, the pandemic, and Semmelweis share is that the audience could see evidence of competence: the engineers' data, the public-health explanation of method, Semmelweis's mortality figures. Humility without that evidence is only vagueness.

Commentary: *This is the complication paragraph and it earns Row C. The writer does not treat the counterexample as a token objection; Semmelweis changes the thesis, narrowing the claim to "evidence of competence." The tension (certainty can be right; uncertainty can be a shelter) is explored, and the commentary connects the three examples through a shared principle. It "advances" the argument rather than repeating it.*

My own experience supports this refined version. My chemistry teacher once answered a hard question by saying, "I'm not sure, but here is how we could find out," and then worked through the method at the board. I trusted her more afterward, not because she had admitted ignorance but because she had shown that she understood the subject well enough to know where its edges were. Had she simply shrugged, the admission would have lowered my confidence. In that classroom, as at NASA and in public health, honesty about limits strengthened trust because it was the visible edge of real knowledge.

Commentary: *The personal example is specific about context and impact, and it is tied back to the abstract question and to the refined thesis (honesty + competence). It reinforces rather than repeating. The final sentence returns to all three examples. Row B: 4 (specific evidence, line of reasoning, consistent commentary). Row C: earned for the nuanced treatment of how trust, humility, and competence interact. Total 6.*

Score: Row A 1, Row B 4, Row C 1 = 6.

Step 6: The 3-Point Essay and What Went Wrong

Dr. Maren Ellery said that “we trust expertise most when it admits what it does not know.” I agree with this statement completely. There are many reasons why this is true, and I will explain them in this essay.

First of all, people trust experts who are honest. For example, in history, many leaders were honest and people trusted them. Abraham Lincoln was known as “Honest Abe” and everyone trusted him. This shows that honesty is important for trust. If an expert admits what he does not know, people will trust him more.

Second, in my own life I have noticed that I trust people who are honest. My teacher once said she did not know the answer and I thought that was good. This shows that admitting you do not know something is good.

Also, in the news, scientists often admit that they do not know everything about things like climate or diseases. This makes people trust them more. Experts who pretend to know everything are not trusted.

In conclusion, Ellery is right that people trust experts who admit they don’t know things. Honesty is the best policy, and this is why this statement is valid.

Scoring: Row A 1 (a position: “agree completely,” arguably defensible though undeveloped; some readers would give 0 for the vague prompt echo). Row B 2 (evidence is general: “many leaders,” “in the news”; commentary restates the claim; no line of reasoning). Row C 0. Total about 3.

What went wrong

PROBLEM	WHERE IT SHOWS	FIX
No definition of terms	“honest” replaces “admits what it does not know”	Distinguish honesty from admitting uncertainty; define trust
Absolute thesis	“agree completely”	Qualify: when, under what conditions
General evidence	“many leaders,” “in the news,” “scientists often”	Name specific cases and causes
Example not matched to the claim	“Honest Abe” is about honesty, not expertise or uncertainty	Choose evidence that fits the exact term
Commentary only restates	“This shows that honesty is important”	Explain how the example supports the specific claim
Parallel, unordered paragraphs	“First of all... Second... Also”	Make each paragraph advance the previous one
No counterargument	Nothing about when the claim fails	Include a case where it fails (confident and correct)
Filler conclusion	“Honesty is the best policy”	Add the implication or refined principle

Pacing the Argument Essay

PHASE	MINUTES	OUTPUT
Unpack and define	2	Claim restated, term defined
Position and examples	3	Thesis, 2–3 examples with their jobs
Write	30	Intro, 2–3 body paragraphs, short conclusion
Review	2	Thesis present? Examples explained?

If you run out of time, a thesis plus two well-developed paragraphs outscores four thin ones. Many students write Question 3 first because it needs no reading; consider doing so if it is your strongest essay and you have a plan for the order.

Checklists

Before You Write

- ☐ I can restate the claim in plain words.
- ☐ I have defined the key term in a way that helps my argument.
- ☐ My thesis takes a position on the **extent**, with a reason or condition.
- ☐ I have chosen examples that fit the exact term, not just the topic.
- ☐ My claims build on each other.

While You Write

- ☐ Each paragraph's topic sentence is a claim that advances the argument.
- ☐ Each example has specific details and a stated cause-and-effect link to the claim.
- ☐ Commentary explains **why the example matters to the abstract question**.
- ☐ At least one concession or limit is built into a paragraph.
- ☐ I avoid sweeping generalizations ("throughout history," "everyone knows").

After You Write

- ☐ I did not drift to an adjacent topic.
- ☐ My conclusion adds an implication or refined principle.
- ☐ I can point to a tension I explored.

Common Pitfalls

1. A thesis that restates the prompt or says "there are many sides."
2. Undefined abstract terms.
3. Binary framing (valid or invalid) with no conditions.
4. Examples listed rather than explained; three examples making the same point.

5. Formulaic counterargument that is dismissed in one sentence.
6. Confusing adjacent concepts (photo albums for selfies).
7. Vague “history” or “society” as evidence.
8. Personal stories without context or connection to the abstract question.

Five Practice Prompts

The following prompts were written for this guide in the style of the exam. The speakers and quotations are fictional.

Practice Prompt 1 (Optimism)

The fictional poet Lena Okoro-Hale, in a 2021 interview, said: “Hope is not the belief that things will be fine; it is the decision to act as though what we do matters.” Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which Okoro-Hale’s claim about hope is valid.

Practice Prompt 2 (Perfection and Mistakes)

The fictional chef and author Daniel Reyes-Park wrote in 2018: “The kitchen teaches you that the best dish is the one you ruin once.” Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which Reyes-Park’s claim about learning from failure is valid.

Practice Prompt 3 (Technology and Attention)

The fictional technology critic Priya Anand-Clarke wrote in a 2022 essay: “A device that is always available makes us unavailable to everything else.” Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which Anand-Clarke’s claim about constant access is valid.

Practice Prompt 4 (Dissent)

The fictional historian Elias Thornquist, in a 2017 lecture, argued: “A society’s health is measured by how it treats those who disagree with it.” Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which Thornquist’s claim about dissent is valid.

Practice Prompt 5 (Place and Identity)

The fictional novelist Rosa Valdivia-Kent wrote in 2020: “We carry our hometowns with us long after we leave, and they decide more than we admit.” Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which Valdivia-Kent’s claim about the influence of home is valid.

Answer Key

Worked-Example Scoring

ESSAY	ROW A	ROW B	ROW C	TOTAL
6-point essay	1	4	1	6
3-point essay	1 (borderline)	2	0	3

Practice Prompts: Model Planning Notes

These are possible plans, not the only valid ones.

Prompt 1 (Hope)

- *Define*: hope as a decision to act vs. a prediction that things will turn out well. Distinguish hope from optimism and from denial.
- *Possible thesis*: "Okoro-Hale is largely right that hope is a decision rather than a forecast, but the claim holds only when action can plausibly change the outcome; where it cannot, hope turns into a way of enduring."
- *Examples*: women's suffrage (72 years of effort, #5); March for Our Lives (#29); 1984, where action fails (#15) as a limit; personal template #35 (plateau).
- *Complication*: hope as an emotion that fuels action vs. as a decision; what about situations of real helplessness?

Prompt 2 (Failure)

- *Define*: "ruin" as a meaningful failure that you can examine; distinguish learning from failure and merely failing.
- *Possible thesis*: "Failure teaches only when it is survivable, examined, and followed by a changed attempt; the claim is valid for low-stakes practice and false for failures that end the chance to try again."
- *Examples*: Apollo 1 and Apollo 11 (#2); Challenger (#19) as a failure that *was not* survivable; Dweck's research and its mixed replications (#23); personal #33.
- *Complication*: the cost of the failure determines its teaching value.

Prompt 3 (Technology and Attention)

- *Define*: availability as being reachable and as being attentive; the claim blends them.
- *Possible thesis*: "Constant access does divide attention, but the cost depends on whether we treat availability as an obligation; the device is less the cause than the amplifier of expectations."
- *Examples*: social media design (#30); remote learning (#32) where connection helped; AI tools (#31); personal #40 or #36.
- *Complication*: the same device creates both connection (remote learning) and distraction.

Prompt 4 (Dissent)

- *Define*: dissent vs. disagreement vs. disorder; "health" of a society.
- *Possible thesis*: "Thornquist is largely right, because a society that protects dissenters can correct its own mistakes, but how a society treats dissent is a symptom as much as a measure, since protecting dissent also requires institutions that people trust."
- *Examples*: Japanese American incarceration (#7); Galileo (#22); *Antigone* (#10); Lincoln's cabinet of rivals (#4); 1984 (#15).
- *Complication*: dissent that threatens others' rights; the limits of tolerance.

Prompt 5 (Place and Identity)

- *Define*: "decide" as shape vs. determine; "hometown" as place vs. community vs. memory.
- *Possible thesis*: "Home shapes the questions we ask more than the answers we give, so Valdivia-Kent is right that it influences us, but wrong if she means that it decides, since people also define themselves

against where they come from."

- *Examples:* *Gatsby* (#9), who invents himself away from his origins; *Huckleberry Finn* (#11), who defies the values of his place; family immigration story (#37).
- *Complication:* leaving as a response to home is also home's influence.

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