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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

Essay Planners: Synthesis, Rhetorical Analysis, **Argument**

One-page planners for each of the three FRQs, a filled example for each, plus a timed-writing reflection sheet and a peer-review checklist keyed to the rubric rows. Print the blank versions and use them for every timed essay.

How to use these planners

A planner is not an outline you must follow. It is a way to spend the first five minutes deciding what you believe and how you will prove it, so the next thirty-five minutes go to writing. Fill it in fast, in fragments. If you cannot complete a box, that is the signal to stop and think before you start writing.

All three planners build toward the same rubric rows:

- **Row A (thesis, 0–1):** a defensible position that responds to the prompt.
- **Row B (evidence and commentary, 0–4):** specific evidence *plus* explanation of how it supports your line of reasoning.
- **Row C (sophistication, 0–1):** a complexity or tension, a broader context, an alternative perspective, or a distinctive style that is sustained, not a single sentence tacked on.

Planner 1: Synthesis (FRQ 1)

Time plan: 15-minute reading period (read and annotate all six sources, then draft the thesis) + about 40 minutes of writing.

Blank planner

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Prompt, in my own words (what is the question?)	
My position (a defensible claim, with a “because” or a qualification)	
Source A: claim in 8 words / how I might use it	
Source B: claim in 8 words / how I might use it	

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Source C: claim in 8 words / how I might use it	
Source D: claim in 8 words / how I might use it	
Source E: claim in 8 words / how I might use it	
Source F: claim in 8 words / how I might use it	
Conversation among sources (which sources agree, which clash, which complicate?)	
Body 1: idea + sources + my commentary	
Body 2: idea + sources + my commentary	
Body 3 (counterargument or qualification): idea + sources + my response	
Outside knowledge I can add (optional)	
Sophistication move	

Filled example

Prompt (written for this guide): A town is deciding whether to convert a vacant lot into a community garden or a parking lot. Using at least three of the sources, develop a position on the best use of the lot.

BOX	NOTES
Prompt, in my own words	Garden or parking: which serves the town better?
My position	A garden serves the town better <i>if</i> the town pays for upkeep and keeps some street parking nearby; parking alone solves a problem that is smaller than it looks.
Source A (city report)	Downtown parking is under capacity on most weekdays. Use: undercuts the parking argument.
Source B (op-ed by shop owner)	Customers will not come without parking. Use: the best counterargument.
Source C (university study)	Community gardens increase neighbor interaction. Use: social benefit.
Source D (graph: weekday parking use)	Peak use is only 62% on weekdays. Use: hard evidence for A.
Source E (cartoon)	A single parked car in a huge lot. Use: vivid support for the capacity point.
Source F (gardener interview)	Gardens need volunteers and a maintenance budget. Use: the qualification.

BOX	NOTES
Conversation	A and D agree and show parking is underused; B disagrees, but B's evidence is anecdotal; F complicates the garden side by naming a real cost.
Body 1	Parking demand is smaller than perceived (A + D + E); commentary: perception, not data, is driving the dispute.
Body 2	The garden's benefit is social and lasting (C); commentary: this is a benefit parking cannot offer.
Body 3	Answer the merchant (B) and concede upkeep (F); commentary: protect the garden by pairing it with a maintenance plan and a few street spaces.
Outside knowledge	Cities that converted lots to green space (general knowledge, not a specific claim I cannot support).
Sophistication	Frame the whole dispute as "perceived scarcity vs. measured scarcity."

Why this plan works: it does not summarize the sources one by one. It organizes by *idea* and puts the sources in conversation.

Planner 2: Rhetorical Analysis (FRQ 2)

Time plan: about 5 minutes of reading and planning, then about 35 minutes of writing.

Blank planner

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Speaker / occasion / audience / purpose (SOAPSTone)	
Message, in one sentence	
Choice 1 (quote) → effect on audience → purpose	
Choice 2 (quote) → effect on audience → purpose	
Choice 3 (quote) → effect on audience → purpose	
Where the tone or strategy shifts	
Thesis (speaker + purpose + choices, in one sentence)	
Body 1 / Body 2 / Body 3 plan (choice + evidence + commentary)	
Sophistication move (tension, complexity, or context)	

Filled example

Passage (public domain): Lincoln, Gettysburg Address (1863).

BOX	NOTES
SOAP	Lincoln / dedication of a cemetery / a grieving public and Northern newspaper readers / to redefine the war's purpose
Message	The dead died for a "new birth of freedom," and the living must finish the work.
Choice 1	He opens with "Four score and seven years ago" → the biblical cadence lends moral weight and places the founding as a shared inheritance → supports redefining the war around equality.
Choice 2	He shifts from "we cannot dedicate... we cannot consecrate" to "the living" who must be dedicated to "the unfinished work" → humility about words, then a call to action → turns grief into obligation.
Choice 3	Parallel structure in "of the people, by the people, for the people" → compresses the purpose into a phrase the audience can carry → makes the principle memorable.
Shift	From past (the founders) to present (the dedication) to future ("shall not perish").
Thesis	In his brief dedication at Gettysburg, Lincoln transforms a ceremony of grief into a charge for the living by situating the war within the nation's founding promise, shifting from what words cannot do to what action must, and compressing the nation's purpose into memorable parallel phrases.
Sophistication	Tension: he claims the speech will be "little noted," while crafting words designed to be long remembered.

Planner 3: Argument (FRQ 3)

Time plan: about 5 minutes of planning, then about 35 minutes of writing.

Blank planner

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Prompt claim, in my own words	
Key terms I need to define	
My position (agree / disagree / qualify: to what extent?)	
Reason 1 + best evidence (history, literature, science, current events, experience)	

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Reason 2 + best evidence	
Reason 3 or counterargument + my response	
Line of reasoning (how the paragraphs build, not just a list)	
Sophistication move	

Filled example

Prompt (written for this guide): "Comparison is the thief of joy." Write an essay that argues your position on the extent to which comparing ourselves with others harms our happiness.

BOX	NOTES
Claim	Measuring ourselves against others makes us less happy.
Key terms	"Comparison" (self-measurement against others) vs. "emulation" (learning from others).
Position	Comparison harms happiness when it is passive and constant, but it can help when it becomes emulation.
Reason 1	Social media shows only highlights, so the comparison is rigged (current events; general research on social comparison).
Reason 2	Comparison shifts attention from our own goals to someone else's scoreboard (personal example or literature).
Counterargument	Competition sharpens performance (athletes, scholars) → response: that works only when it points us toward a skill, not toward envy.
Line of reasoning	Why the harm happens → when comparison is harmless or useful → what to do about it.
Sophistication	Distinguish comparison from emulation so the essay does not simply agree with the slogan.

Timed-writing reflection sheet

Fill this out within an hour of every timed essay, while it is fresh.

QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER
Prompt and date	
Time I spent planning / writing / revising	
Did my thesis respond to the prompt and take a position?	
Which evidence was strongest? Which was weakest?	

QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER
Did every body paragraph explain <i>how</i> the evidence supports my claim?	
Where did I summarize instead of analyze?	
Did I attempt a sophistication move? Was it sustained?	
One thing to do differently next time	

Peer-review checklist (by rubric row)

Trade essays with a partner. Mark each line "yes," "partly," or "no," and write one sentence of evidence for any "no."

Row A: Thesis - Does the thesis respond to the prompt rather than restate it? - Is it a position someone could reasonably dispute? - For FRQ 2, does it name the speaker's purpose *and* the choices?

Row B: Evidence and commentary - Does each body paragraph include specific evidence (a quotation, a source detail, an example)? - Does the commentary explain *how* the evidence supports the claim, beyond "this shows"? - Does the essay develop a line of reasoning, with each paragraph building on the last? - For FRQ 1, are at least three sources used, with clear attribution, and are the sources put in conversation?

Row C: Sophistication - Is there a sustained tension or complexity, a broader context, or an alternative perspective? - Is the writing style precise and persuasive throughout? - (Remember: one clever sentence or a single sophisticated word does not earn the point.)

Score the essay

ROW	POINTS EARNED	WHY
A (0–1)		
B (0–4)		
C (0–1)		
Total (0–6)		

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