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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

# FRQ Mini-Drills: 15-Minute Practice Tasks

Twenty short drills that train the individual skills behind the three essays: thesis writing, commentary, source synthesis, and sophistication. Each takes about 15 minutes or less. Do one or two a day, then compare your work to the model answers at the end.

**How to use this document.** Write your own answer *before* you read the model. Do not copy the model; compare it. Ask: what did the model do that I did not? Then rewrite your answer once.

## Part 1: Thesis drills (Drills 1–10)

A strong thesis for the AP exam does three things: it responds to the prompt, it takes a position someone could dispute (or, for rhetorical analysis, it names purpose and choices), and it hints at the line of reasoning. Write a one- or two-sentence thesis for each stimulus. Take no more than 90 seconds per drill.

**Drill 1 (Argument).** *Prompt:* "Failure is the best teacher." Write a thesis that argues the extent to which this is valid.

**Drill 2 (Argument).** *Prompt:* "Social media has made people more connected." Write a thesis that qualifies the claim.

**Drill 3 (Argument).** *Prompt:* "Cities should ban cars from their downtown cores." Write a thesis that takes a clear position.

**Drill 4 (Argument).** *Prompt:* "Standardized tests measure ability fairly." Write a thesis that argues the extent to which this is true.

**Drill 5 (Argument).** *Prompt:* "Great leaders are born, not made." Write a thesis that makes a defensible claim.

**Drill 6 (Rhetorical analysis).** *Stimulus:* In 1863 Abraham Lincoln dedicates a cemetery at Gettysburg, speaking to a grieving public. He opens with the founding of the nation and ends with a call for "a new birth of freedom." Write a thesis that names his purpose and two choices.

**Drill 7 (Rhetorical analysis).** *Stimulus:* In 1852 Frederick Douglass, speaking at an Independence Day gathering, praises the founders and then asks, "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?" Write a thesis that names his purpose and two choices.

**Drill 8 (Rhetorical analysis).** *Stimulus:* In 1729 Jonathan Swift, in "A Modest Proposal," adopts the voice of a calm reformer who proposes that the poor of Ireland sell their children as food. Write a thesis that names Swift's purpose and two choices.

**Drill 9 (Synthesis).** *Prompt:* Sources suggest that school gardens improve nutrition, cost money, and require volunteers. Write a thesis on whether schools should create gardens, with a qualification.

**Drill 10 (Synthesis).** *Prompt:* Sources suggest that remote work saves commuting time but may reduce collaboration. Write a thesis on whether companies should keep remote options.

## Part 2: Commentary drills (Drills 11–14)

Commentary is the explanation of *how* your evidence supports your claim. A common weakness is "This shows that..." followed by a restatement. A better commentary names the effect, the audience's response, and the link to the claim. For each evidence sentence below, write **three sentences of commentary**. Do not restate the evidence; explain what it does.

**Drill 11.** *Claim:* Lincoln builds credibility by connecting the war to the nation's founding. *Evidence:* He begins with "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation."

**Drill 12.** *Claim:* Douglass uses irony to expose the audience's hypocrisy. *Evidence:* He tells his audience that the Fourth of July is "your" holiday, not his.

**Drill 13.** *Claim:* Swift's narrator sounds reasonable in order to make the proposal more horrifying. *Evidence:* The narrator calculates the cost of the proposal in precise figures.

**Drill 14.** *Claim:* Cities with more frequent bus service see higher ridership. *Evidence:* A report states that one city's ridership rose after it cut wait times from forty minutes to fifteen.

## Part 3: Source synthesis drills (Drills 15–17)

A synthesis sentence brings two sources together in your own argument. It names each source, says what each contributes, and shows how they relate (agree, extend, complicate, or conflict). Avoid "Source A says... Source B says...".

**Drill 15.** *Source A (city report):* Downtown parking is used at about 60% of capacity on weekdays. *Source B (merchant's op-ed):* Customers will not shop downtown without parking. Write one sentence that synthesizes the two sources in service of a position on adding parking.

**Drill 16.** *Source A (study):* Students who start school later report more sleep. *Source B (coach's interview):* Later starts make it hard to schedule practices. Write one sentence that synthesizes the two sources in service of a position on later start times.

**Drill 17.** *Source A (graph):* Community gardens increased in number from 2010 to 2020. *Source B (gardener interview):* Many gardens close within five years for lack of volunteers. Write one sentence that synthesizes the two sources, and then one sentence that adds your own qualification.

## Part 4: Sophistication drills (Drills 18–20)

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The sophistication point is earned by a *sustained* move: a tension or complexity, a broader context, an alternative perspective, or a distinctive style. A single clever sentence does not earn it. For each drill, write a short paragraph (4–6 sentences) that makes the move.

**Drill 18 (Tension and complexity).** *Claim:* Social media connects people. Write a paragraph that argues it both connects and isolates, and explains why both are true.

**Drill 19 (Broader context).** *Claim:* Lincoln's brevity at Gettysburg was effective. Write a paragraph that places the speech in the context of Everett's two-hour oration that preceded it and explains what the contrast reveals.

**Drill 20 (Alternative perspective).** *Claim:* Standardized tests are an objective measure of ability. Write a paragraph that takes this position but takes seriously an argument against it, and explains why the position still holds.

## Model Answers

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**Drill 1.** While failure can teach lessons that success cannot, it teaches only those who reflect on it; failure is the best teacher when paired with honest analysis, and a poor one when it is merely endured.

**Drill 2.** Social media has widened the number of people we can reach but not the depth of what we share, so it has connected us in quantity while often leaving the quality of connection thin.

**Drill 3.** Cities should restrict cars in downtown cores, but only after investing in reliable transit, because without alternatives a ban shifts the burden onto residents who cannot afford to adjust.

**Drill 4.** Standardized tests measure certain skills consistently, but because access to preparation is uneven, they reflect opportunity as much as ability, and should be used alongside other measures.

**Drill 5.** Leadership is largely made rather than born: although temperament may help, the decisive qualities, such as judgment and the ability to listen, are developed through experience and reflection.

**Drill 6.** In his dedication at Gettysburg, Lincoln transforms a ceremony of mourning into a charge for the living by anchoring the war in the founding promise of equality and compressing that purpose into memorable, parallel phrasing.

**Drill 7.** Douglass confronts an audience gathered to celebrate by first praising the founders to build credibility, then turning abruptly to the experience of the enslaved, forcing his listeners to see the contradiction between their ideals and their institutions.

**Drill 8.** Swift exposes the cruelty of policies toward the poor by adopting the voice of a calm and reasonable reformer, using precise economic detail to make the proposal's horror more shocking by contrast.

**Drill 9.** Schools should create gardens, but only if they commit to a maintenance plan and volunteer coordination, because the nutritional benefits depend on gardens surviving beyond their first season.

**Drill 10.** Companies should keep remote options, but pair them with scheduled in-person days, because the time saved by remote work is real and so is the collaboration lost when teams never meet.

**Drill 11 (model commentary).** By echoing the language of the founding, Lincoln places the current war inside a story his audience already honors, so the struggle appears as the continuation of the nation's purpose rather than a new and divisive cause. The biblical cadence of "four score and seven" gives the sentence the weight of

scripture, which lends his words moral authority at a moment when the audience is grieving. This groundwork lets him redefine the war's purpose later in the speech without seeming to impose a new idea.

**Drill 12 (model commentary).** The pronoun “your” opens a distance between speaker and audience that Douglass intends the audience to feel. A listener who came to celebrate suddenly realizes the celebration excludes the man addressing them. That discomfort is the point: Douglass turns a patriotic occasion into a moral reckoning, and the audience cannot dismiss the charge because he has used their own holiday to make it.

**Drill 13 (model commentary).** The precise figures give the narrator the sound of a careful economist, which makes the proposal seem, at first, like policy rather than horror. The reader's growing alarm comes from the gap between the calm tone and the monstrous content. Swift thus indicts not only the proposal but the habit of reducing human suffering to numbers.

**Drill 14 (model commentary).** The drop from forty minutes to fifteen shows that riders respond to reliability, not just availability. The report's evidence supports the claim by tying a specific change in service to a specific change in behavior. If frequency drives ridership, then the barrier to ridership is not demand but convenience, and that is a problem a city can fix.

**Drill 15.** Although the city report shows that downtown parking is used at about 60 percent of capacity, the merchant's claim that customers need parking suggests that the problem is perception rather than supply, which means the better response is to make existing parking easier to find rather than to build more.

**Drill 16.** The study's finding that later starts bring more sleep supports changing the schedule, while the coach's concern about practices shows that the change carries a real cost, so the strongest position accepts later start times but pairs them with a revised practice schedule.

**Drill 17.** The graph shows that community gardens are multiplying, but the gardener's account of early closures complicates the trend by suggesting that growth in number does not mean growth in lasting impact. Cities that want durable gardens should therefore fund volunteer coordination, not only the creation of new plots.

**Drill 18 (model paragraph).** Social media does connect people, but the connection it offers is of a particular kind. It lets a friend across the country see a photograph of a new baby within seconds, which is a real gift. It also lets us watch the lives of hundreds of acquaintances without ever speaking to them, which can feel like closeness while leaving us more alone. Both effects are true at once, and the difference between them is use: social media connects us when it prompts a conversation and isolates us when it replaces one.

**Drill 19 (model paragraph).** Lincoln's brevity gains meaning from what came before it. Edward Everett's oration lasted about two hours and recounted the battle in detail, as the occasion seemed to demand. Lincoln's two-minute address did the opposite: it declined to narrate the battle and instead asked what the sacrifice was for. The contrast reveals that his brevity was not an accident of style but a rhetorical choice. By saying less, he turned a commemoration into a charge, and the audience left with a purpose rather than a story.

**Drill 20 (model paragraph).** Standardized tests are the most consistent measure of ability available, because every student answers the same questions under the same conditions. Critics are right that access to test preparation is uneven, and that a score can reflect resources as well as skill. But that argument is an argument for fairer preparation, not for abandoning the measure; a test that is imperfect but comparable is more useful than a system with no comparison at all. The sensible position is to keep the test while treating its results as one piece of evidence rather than the whole.

## Self-check rubric for thesis drills

| QUESTION                                                         | YES / NO |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Does it respond to the prompt instead of restating it?           |          |
| Does it take a position or name a purpose someone could dispute? |          |
| Does it hint at the reasoning or name the choices?               |          |
| Is it one or two sentences, not a paragraph?                     |          |

If you answer “no” to any item, rewrite the thesis once before moving on.

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