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AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

The 6-Point Rubrics **Decoded**

The official AP Lit essay rubrics translated into student language, with decision rules, "earns / loses" tables, annotated mini-examples, and a self-scoring checklist. Use it before you write a practice essay (to know the target) and after (to score honestly).

All examples of student writing in this document are original, written for this guide. The sample poem lines and passage are invented so that no copyrighted text is reproduced.

The architecture: one rubric, three rows

Every essay (Q1 poetry, Q2 prose, Q3 literary argument) is scored out of 6.

ROW	NAME	POINTS	ONE-LINE MEANING
A	Thesis	0–1	Did you make a defensible claim about what the text means?
B	Evidence and Commentary	0–4	Did you use specific evidence and explain how it proves your claim, in a connected line of reasoning?
C	Sophistication	0–1	Did you sustain a complex reading, not just a correct one?

Where the points actually are (2025 Chief Reader Report): Row A averages about 0.9, so almost everyone gets it. Row B averaged 2.49 on Q1 and 2.29 on Q2. Row C averaged 0.04–0.07. **Your realistic gains are in Row B.**

Row A: Thesis (0–1)

In student language

Your thesis must say something about the *meaning* of the poem, passage, or work that a reasonable person could argue with, and it must answer the prompt. It can be one sentence or several, and it can appear anywhere, though the introduction is the safe place.

Decision rules

1. **Does it make a claim, or just name a topic?** “The poem is about aging” is a topic. “The speaker treats aging as a quiet reclamation rather than a loss” is a claim.
2. **Is it more than the prompt restated?** If the prompt asks about the speaker’s “complex attitude toward the seasons,” then “The speaker has a complex attitude toward the seasons” earns nothing. You must say what the complexity is.
3. **Is it more than a device list?** “The poet uses imagery, diction, and metaphor to convey meaning” fits any poem ever written. It earns nothing.
4. **Is it defensible?** The text must offer at least minimal support. It need not be proven in the thesis itself.
5. **It does not have to preview your whole essay.** A line of reasoning in the thesis helps, but it is not required for Row A.

Earns / loses

EARNs THE POINT	LOSES THE POINT
A claim about interpretation that responds to the prompt	Restating the prompt in your own words
A claim that specifies the complexity (both X and Y; X yet Y)	A list of devices with no claim about meaning
A claim about how the concept (Q3) works in the whole work	Plot summary presented as a thesis
A debatable reading with minimal textual support	A claim so general it fits any text
Interpretation that is unusual but supportable	A claim the text contradicts, or a response to a different prompt

Annotated mini-example: thesis with and without a defensible interpretation

Invented prompt: In the following poem, the speaker returns to the house where she grew up. Analyze how the poet uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker’s complex experience of returning home.

Version 1 (0 points): “In this poem, the poet uses imagery, diction, and figurative language to show the speaker’s complex experience of returning home.”

Why it fails: The first half is a device list, the second half is the prompt. There is no claim about what the experience is.

Version 2 (0 points): “The speaker goes back to her childhood house and finds that it has changed, and she feels sad and nostalgic.”

Why it fails: This is summary plus a single flat emotion. “Sad and nostalgic” is not complex and does not interpret.

Version 3 (1 point): “Although the speaker expects the house to restore her childhood, the poem shows that returning only confirms how much of that past exists inside her, not in the rooms, so that homecoming becomes an act of mourning that is also a quiet liberation.”

Why it earns the point: It makes a claim, names the complexity (mourning that is also liberation), and responds to the prompt. A reader can argue with it, and the poem could support it.

Q3 note

For Q3, Row A may be a claim about the concept in the work *or* about how the concept contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Any reasonable reading of the prompt’s key term is acceptable. A thesis for the prompt “a character significantly affected by a memory” might be: “In *Beloved*, memory is not something Sethe recalls but something she is forced to re-inhabit, and Morrison’s novel argues that survival requires a form of remembering that is also a form of telling.”

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4)

In student language

Row B asks two things together: **evidence** (specific words, details, moments from the text) and **commentary** (your explanation of how that evidence supports your claim). The higher scores reward a *line of reasoning*, meaning your paragraphs build on each other toward your thesis, and, for Q1 and Q2, explanation of how literary elements and techniques create meaning.

The four levels

SCORE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	TYPICAL RESPONSE
0	Restates thesis, repeats the prompt, or offers irrelevant information	No textual references; opinion; incoherent
1	Evidence is general; commentary summarizes the evidence instead of explaining how it supports a claim	Plot summary or paraphrase; devices named with no explanation
2	Some specific, relevant evidence and some explanation, but no line of reasoning or a faulty one	Mix of specifics and broad generalities; one point developed well and others left as stubs; connections between claims unclear; explanations repetitive or simplistic

SCORE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	TYPICAL RESPONSE
3	Specific evidence supports all claims in a line of reasoning; commentary explains how <i>some</i> evidence supports the line of reasoning; explains how at least one literary element or technique contributes to meaning	Uniformly specific evidence; attention to particular words; multiple supporting claims; some evidence left unexplained or not integrated
4	Specific evidence supports all claims; commentary <i>consistently</i> explains how evidence supports the line of reasoning; explains how <i>multiple</i> literary elements or techniques contribute to meaning	Everything in a 3, plus every claim is explained and several techniques are shown working together

Decision rules

- **Plot summary or paraphrase alone is a 1.** No matter how accurate.
- **Naming a device is not analyzing it.** “The simile in line 4 creates imagery” earns nothing. Say what the simile makes the reader see or feel and why it matters to the claim.
- **Repeated instances of one technique are one technique.** Four images of decay count as multiple elements only if you show each doing something different. Otherwise you are capped at 3.
- **You do not need terminology.** A response that never names a device but explains exactly how specific language choices create meaning can earn 3 or 4.
- **Row B does not depend on Row A.** An essay with no thesis can still earn Row B points.
- **Mechanical errors that interfere with communication prevent the fourth point.**
- **Quote less, explain more.** A quotation of seven words or fewer, embedded in your sentence, followed by two sentences of commentary, is the model.

Earns / loses

EARNs	LOSEs
Quoting the exact word or phrase you analyze	Quoting a long passage and moving on
Explaining the effect of a specific word choice (why “clutched” and not “held”)	Saying the word “shows” or “reveals” the thesis
Topic sentences that advance an idea (each one new)	Paragraphs that repeat the same idea with new quotations
Connecting a technique to meaning (“the broken syntax enacts her unraveling”)	Listing techniques (“the poet uses alliteration, metaphor, and imagery”)
Using indirect evidence: the title, a secondary character, the last line	Using evidence from only the first half of the text
Organizing by idea	Organizing by device (“Paragraph 1: imagery. Paragraph 2: diction.”)

Annotated mini-example: commentary at 4 versus 2

Invented excerpt (original, not from any published work):

The kitchen had not changed. The same oilcloth, the same clock that ran six minutes slow, the same chair she had never been allowed to sit in. Mara touched its back lightly, as one touches a thing that might still be warm.

Prompt idea: analyze how the author conveys Mara's complex response to returning to her mother's kitchen.

Commentary scoring 2 (summary plus a device name): "The author uses a simile to show that Mara still feels connected to her mother. When Mara 'touched its back lightly, as one touches a thing that might still be warm,' it shows she misses her mother. This helps the reader understand her feelings."

What is wrong: The evidence is real, but the commentary only restates ("shows she misses her mother"), says "helps the reader understand," and gives no explanation of *how* the language does anything. It names the simile but not its function. Connection to a thesis is vague.

Commentary scoring 4 (explains how multiple choices create meaning, and ties to the claim): "The passage insists on sameness ('had not changed,' 'the same,' 'the same'), but its details undermine that stability: a clock that is 'six minutes slow' has been wrong for years, so the familiar room is already a small error in time. Mara's touch is the turn. The chair she was 'never allowed' to sit in is now a thing she approaches with a tenderness that borders on trespass, and the simile 'as one touches a thing that might still be warm' compresses her ambivalence: warmth is what she wants and also what she knows is gone, since the conditional 'might' keeps the dead mother present only as a possibility. The anaphora of 'the same' builds comfort; the modal 'might' and the restriction 'never allowed' complicate it, so that Mara's return is less recovery than permitted trespass on a history that still governs her."

Why it earns a 4: It explains the effect of specific words ('slow,' 'might,' 'never allowed'), uses three techniques (repetition, simile, modal verb and diction), shows how they work together, and returns to the claim about complexity.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1)

In student language

Sophistication is a **byproduct** of a complex thesis plus close word-level analysis. It is not a separate trick, and it cannot rescue a thin Row B. Readers award it when the complexity is *part of your argument throughout*, not when one "deep" sentence appears.

The four official pathways

An essay earns the point by doing one or more of these, consistently:

Pathway 1: Identify and explore complexities or tensions within the text. Sustained attention to paradox, double meanings, irony, inner versus outer conflict, or how a title, epigraph, shift, or final line complicates the reading. This is the most common route.

Example (poem, original): "The speaker insists she is unaffected by the departure, yet the poem's sentences grow shorter and its punctuation more clipped as it goes on. The refusal to grieve is itself the grief."

Pathway 2: Illuminate the interpretation by situating it in a broader context. Historical, cultural, literary, or archetypal context that sharpens your reading. For Q3, historical context is the most common route. The context has to do work; it cannot be decoration.

Example (Q3, original): "Chopin's Edna Pontellier seeks autonomy in a culture that defines a woman through her relationships to husband and children. Her death at sea is therefore not merely tragic but the novel's measure of how little room that society offers for a self that belongs only to itself."

Pathway 3: Account for alternative interpretations. You raise a competing reading and adjudicate it, rather than hinting at it. This is the rarest pathway and demanding to do in 40 minutes.

Example (poem, original): "A reader might take the final image of the closed door as the speaker's defeat. But the verb 'settles' belongs to a vocabulary of rest, not collapse, and the door is closed from the inside. The poem asks us to see the closing as choice."

Pathway 4: Employ a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive. Precise verbs, embedded quotations, controlled sentence variety, an authentic voice, sustained for the whole essay. This is not vocabulary inflation.

Example (original): "Grief in this poem does not announce itself; it rearranges the furniture. The speaker sets the table for one and calls it order."

What does not earn it

- Sweeping generalizations passed off as context ("Throughout history, humans have struggled with loss").
- Merely hinting at another reading ("Some might disagree, but...") and moving on.
- One sophisticated-sounding sentence, especially in the conclusion.
- Ornate language that does not advance the argument.
- Simplifying complexities, or ignoring details that contradict your thesis.
- Writing the word "complex" without showing complexity.

The tradeoff

Teachers sometimes debate "1+4+0 versus 1+3+1." A thorough Row B is worth more than a reach for Row C. Build the evidence-and-commentary engine first; add one deliberate complexity move (usually an "although/yet" thesis and attention to the shift) second.

Differences for Q3 (Literary Argument)

Q3 uses the same three rows, but with these changes.

FEATURE	Q1 AND Q2	Q3
Source of evidence	A passage on the page	A work you choose and remember

FEATURE	Q1 AND Q2	Q3
Row A	Interpretation of the poem or passage that responds to the prompt	Claim about the concept in the work, or about how it contributes to the interpretation of the work as a whole; any reasonable interpretation of the key term is acceptable
Row B, third point	Requires explaining how at least one literary element or technique contributes to meaning	No technique requirement
Row B, fourth point	Consistent commentary plus multiple techniques	Consistent commentary plus the response addresses the interpretation of the work as a whole
Row B, one point	Summary of the passage	Narrative developments rather than specific details (plot summary)
Quotation	Expected	Paraphrase with specific, concrete detail is fine

What this means in practice. On Q3, “specific” means specific scenes, actions, images, and details, even if you cannot quote word-for-word. “Sethe’s decision in the shed” is general. “Sethe stands in the shed with a handsaw as schoolteacher’s nephews arrive, and the novel refuses to let her act be only a crime or only love” is specific. And every paragraph should end by returning to the meaning of the **whole** work.

Where Q3 essays lose points (Chief Reader Reports 2024 and 2025): evidence that is too general; drifting into plot summary; losing the prompt’s key term halfway through (writing about “trauma” when the prompt said “memory,” or about decisions when it said “indecision”); and misreading the prompt.

Self-scoring checklist

Score your essay in this order. Be strict. Where in doubt, give the lower score and note what would have earned the higher one.

Row A checklist (circle 0 or 1)

- ☐ I can point to a sentence that says what the text *means* or *argues*.
- ☐ That sentence answers this prompt, not a different one.
- ☐ It says more than the prompt does (it names the complexity or the interpretation).
- ☐ It is not just a list of devices.
- ☐ A reasonable reader could disagree with it, but the text offers support.

Score A: _____ (needs all five checks)

Row B checklist

Count and mark each:

1. Number of claims in my essay (topic sentences or main points): _____
2. Number of those claims supported by *specific* evidence (a word, phrase, image, detail, scene): _____
3. Number of pieces of evidence followed by commentary explaining *how* the evidence supports the claim (not just restating it): _____
4. Number of different literary elements or techniques whose function I actually explained (not just named): _____
5. Do my paragraphs build, so that each advances or complicates the last? yes / no
6. Is my organization by idea (not by device)? yes / no
7. For Q3: do I return to the meaning of the whole work? yes / no
8. Any errors that interfere with meaning? yes / no

Scoring guide:

IF...	ROW B IS LIKELY
Mostly summary; devices named but not explained	1
Some specifics, some explanation, but gaps; no clear line of reasoning (items 2 or 3 are less than item 1; item 5 is no)	2
Evidence is specific for all claims; some commentary explains how (item 3 is at least half of item 2); at least one technique explained (item 4 at least 1); line of reasoning present	3
Items 1, 2, and 3 are equal (every claim supported and explained); item 4 is 2 or more; line of reasoning clear; no meaning-blocking errors (and for Q3, item 7 yes)	4

Score B: _____

Row C checklist (circle 0 or 1)

- ☐ I can name which pathway I used: complexity / context / alternative reading / style.
- ☐ It appears in at least three places in the essay, not one.
- ☐ It changes how I read the evidence, not just how I phrase the conclusion.
- ☐ It is not a generalization about "humanity" or "society."
- ☐ I already have at least a 3 on Row B.

Score C: _____ (needs all five checks)

Total

A _____ + B _____ + C _____ = _____ / 6

Record the result in *Score Calculator and Goal-Setting Worksheet*.

Calibration anchors

TOTAL	WHAT THE ESSAY GENERALLY LOOKS LIKE
6	Complex thesis; every claim explained; several techniques working together; sustained complexity; clean prose
5	Strong thesis; consistent commentary; multiple techniques; no sustained sophistication, or one small gap in Row B
4	Defensible thesis; specific evidence; commentary explains some of it; one or two techniques; line of reasoning present
3	General or partial thesis; mixture of specific and general evidence; commentary uneven; weak or missing line of reasoning
2	Weak or no thesis; mostly summary; a few specifics with thin explanation
1	Summary or paraphrase; device naming; nearly no commentary
0	Blank, off topic, or restates the prompt only

National means are about 3.2–3.5 per essay. A 4 on each essay, combined with a solid multiple-choice score, is a 4 on the exam.

What readers wrote about real student essays (Chief Reader Reports 2024–2025)

Reading these will help you recognize your own habits.

PROMPT	WHAT LOST POINTS
2025 Q1	Students noted the absence of punctuation and a lowercase “i” but did not say what those choices reveal; named decay imagery without examining particular words
2025 Q2	Students leaned on details about Thomas and overlooked Olga and Tonie; mentioned “authenticity” without exploring it; claims were not connected
2024 Q1	Few explored how “solitary,” “companionless,” and “Alone” differ; many missed the turn at “But there the likeness ends.”
2024 Q2	Students overlooked irony and humor, the teacher anecdotes, and the omniscient narrator; read “prodded” one-dimensionally

PROMPT	WHAT LOST POINTS
2024/2025 Q3	Evidence too general; drift into plot summary; lost the key term (indecision, memory); misread the prompt

Rubric glossary

TERM	PLAIN-LANGUAGE MEANING
Defensible	A reader could argue it and the text offers at least minimal support. It need not be the “right” reading, only a reasonable one.
Interpretation	A claim about what the text means or does, beyond what it literally says.
Thesis	The sentence(s) stating your interpretation in response to the prompt.
Line of reasoning	The chain of connected claims that builds your argument; each claim advances or complicates the one before.
Evidence	Specific details from the text: words, phrases, images, structures, scenes.
Specific	Names a particular word, detail, or moment. “Imagery” is general; “the ‘rust-colored’ water” is specific.
Commentary	Your explanation of how the evidence supports the claim and why it matters.
Literary element or technique	Any craft choice: diction, imagery, syntax, tone, structure, shift, point of view, figurative language, sound, form, characterization, setting.
Contributes to meaning	The choice is shown to create or change what the text says, not just exist.
Complex	Containing two or more truths at once, or tension between them. Not “complicated” or “mixed feelings” stated flatly.
Sophistication	A sustained, complex literary argument (see the four pathways).
Work as a whole	The entire novel, play, or story, not a single scene. Q3 requires you to address it.
Summary / paraphrase	Retelling the plot or restating the text in plainer words. It earns at most a 1 on Row B.
Integrated evidence	A quotation or detail woven into your own sentence and followed by commentary.

TERM	PLAIN-LANGUAGE MEANING
Key term	The central concept of the prompt (for example, "memory" or "indecision"). Your essay must define and keep it.

Using this document well

1. Before writing, reread the three level descriptions of Row B and decide which you are aiming for.
2. After writing, score your own essay with the checklist, then swap with a partner and score theirs.
3. For every point lost, write one sentence stating what you would change.
4. Track your row scores across essays in the FRQ tracker in the worksheet. A pattern (for instance, always 2 on Row B) tells you which Step-by-Step Question Guide and which drills to use next.

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