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AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

Pacing, Reading Strategy, and Test-Day Playbook

This is your plan for managing time and nerves on the AP English Literature and Composition exam. Read it once now, practice the timings in your practice sessions, and reread Parts 6 and 7 in the last week and the night before the exam.

Part 1: The exam at a glance

SECTION	CONTENT	QUESTIONS	TIME	WEIGHT
I. Multiple choice	5 passages (at least 2 prose fiction or drama and at least 2 poems), 8-13 questions each	55	60 minutes	45%
II. Free response	Q1 poetry analysis, Q2 prose fiction analysis, Q3 literary argument	3 essays	120 minutes (about 40 each)	55%

Since May 2025 every multiple-choice question has **four** answer choices (A-D), and the exam is delivered digitally in the Bluebook app. Practice material published before 2025 uses five choices.

There is no penalty for wrong answers. You answer every question.

Each essay is scored out of 6 using the same analytic rubric architecture: Thesis (0-1), Evidence and Commentary (0-4), Sophistication (0-1).

What the scores mean

College Board does not publish exact composite cutoffs. Approximate score-calculator reconstructions put a 5 at about 70 percent of the composite, a 4 at about 58-69 percent, and a 3 at about 43-57 percent. A rough target for a 3 is 22-30 multiple-choice questions correct with essays averaging 3; for a 4, about 30-38 correct with essays near 4; for a 5, about 38 or more correct with essays near 5. These are estimates, not official figures. In 2025, about 74 percent of students earned a 3 or higher.

Part 2: Multiple-choice pacing (60 minutes)

The budget

ITEM	TIME
Per passage	11-12 minutes
Per question	about 1 minute (including reading)
Reading a poem (two passes)	2.5-3 minutes
Reading a prose passage (one pass with gists)	2.5-3 minutes
Total reserve	2-3 minutes for the end

Plan: 5 passages x 11 minutes = 55 minutes, leaving 5 minutes for review and for any passage you skipped.

The four-quarter method (adapted from teacher Boyd's coaching)

This is a four-step routine for each passage.

1. **Quarter 1: Preview the stems (not the choices).** Spend 20-30 seconds scanning the question stems. Mark the line numbers, the verbs (suggests, reveals, serves, emphasizes), and any EXCEPT or NOT. You now know what to look for.
2. **Quarter 2: Read the passage.** Read once, with five-word gists for prose or sentence-by-sentence for poetry. Bracket the lines the questions cite.
3. **Quarter 3: Answer the line-specific questions first.** Reread the cited lines plus a sentence either side. Predict the answer before looking at the choices. Eliminate.
4. **Quarter 4: Answer the whole-passage questions last** (tone of the whole, theme, structure, purpose), using your gists.

Eliminating choices

PATTERN	WHAT TO DO
Opposite pair	One is often the key; decide valence first
Synonymous pair	Both are usually wrong
Half right	"Half wrong is all wrong"; reject
Extreme words (always, never, only, completely)	Prefer measured answers
True but not asked	Reject choices that are true of the passage but do not answer the question
Wrong lines	The idea is real but belongs to another part of the passage
Literal reading of a figure	Ask what quality transfers

Order of passages

You may do the passages in any order, and Bluebook lets you move. Many students do the genre they are strongest in first. If poetry makes you anxious, do the prose and drama sets first so you bank those points, then take both poems with the remaining time. Do not spend more than 14 minutes on any one passage; mark and move on.

If you are behind

- At 24 minutes you should be starting your third passage. At 36 minutes, your fourth. At 48 minutes, your fifth.
- If you reach 50 minutes and still have a passage untouched, skim it for 60 seconds and answer only the line-specific questions. Then guess the rest; there is no penalty.
- Never leave anything blank. Pick one letter for all remaining questions if you must; the odds favor you over blank.

Part 3: The 10-minute break and the transition

There is a short break between sections. Eat something small, drink water, stand up. Do not review the multiple-choice questions you just answered; they are done. Use the break to read your essay-order plan (Part 4) and to take three slow breaths.

Part 4: Free-response pacing (120 minutes)

The budget

TASK	TIME
Per essay	40 minutes
Reading and planning	8-10 minutes
Writing	27-30 minutes
Reread and fix	2-3 minutes

Three essays x 40 minutes = 120 minutes. There is no time to waste on any one of them.

Essay order

You may write the essays in any order. Choose the order that gets your best performance on the most points:

IF	THEN
Q3 is your strongest (you have prepared works)	Start with Q3, then the one you find easier of Q1 and Q2
Poetry makes you nervous	Do Q2 and Q3 first, and Q1 last, but do not leave less than 40 minutes for Q1
You warm up slowly	Start with the essay that has the most straightforward prompt

Whatever order you choose, **never leave an essay blank**. A clear thesis and one developed paragraph can earn 2-3 points.

Minute-by-minute plans

Q1: Poetry (40 minutes)

MINUTES	TASK
0-2	Read the prompt; underline "complex" and the target
2-5	Read 1: literal; speaker, situation, arc; use the title
5-8	Reads 2 and 3: hunt for the target; bracket the turn; circle repetition and punctuation patterns
8-10	N-F-I list; draft the "although/yet" thesis; write three topic sentences
10-14	Introduction (2-3 sentences) and Body 1
14-27	Body 2 and Body 3 (6-7 minutes each)
27-37	If time remains, a fourth short body paragraph or a sentence of commentary on a missed word
37-40	Reread; fix grammar; add a closing sentence that extends the meaning

Q2: Prose (40 minutes)

MINUTES	TASK
0-2	Read the prompt; underline "complex" and the target
2-6	Read 1: five-word gists; list every character, including minor ones
6-9	Read 2: lens notes (narration, characterization, setting, structure, figurative language); bracket the turn
9-11	N-F-I list; thesis; three topic sentences
11-14	Introduction
14-34	Three body paragraphs, about 7 minutes each; give the minor character a share
34-40	Fix grammar; add one word-level comment; short closing

Q3: Literary argument (40 minutes)

MINUTES	TASK
0-2	Read the prompt; underline the key term; define it

MINUTES	TASK
2-8	Brainstorm: list every work, character, scene, and detail that fits; choose the work you know best
8-11	Thesis; three claim-based topic sentences; choose two or three scenes for each
11-14	Introduction
14-34	Three body paragraphs; end each by returning to the work as a whole
34-40	Short conclusion with specific context; reread; check that the key term appears in every paragraph

In Bluebook

- **Typing:** type your essays; you cannot handwrite. Practice typing 400-500 words in 28 minutes.
- **Annotation tools:** use the highlighter and the notes feature to underline the key term, mark the turn, and jot brief gists. Practice with them in the Bluebook practice mode before test day.
- **Navigation:** you can flip between passages and questions; mark questions you want to revisit.
- **Time:** watch the clock in the interface, not your phone. Write the start time of each essay on scratch paper if you are allowed one.
- **Do not rely on spell-check.** It may not be available; reread for homophones (its/it's, affect/effect).

Part 5: Reading strategy at a glance

Poems: the 3-read protocol

1. Read 1: speaker, situation, emotional arc, confusing line; use the title and footnotes.
2. Read 2: find the turn; mark repetition, pronouns, and punctuation patterns.
3. Read 3 (question-driven or essay-driven): reread only the lines the question or your plan points at, plus a line either side.

Prose and drama: gists and lenses

1. Write a five-word gist for each paragraph.
2. Ask the five lens questions: Who tells it and how close? Who is on the page? Where and what? What happens or fails to? Where does it turn?
3. Mark irony, contrast, and repetition. Watch for minor characters.

For essays: N-F-I

Notice widely, **Focus** on the details that cluster around the prompt's target, **Interpret** how the technique creates the effect. Then build a thesis with "although/yet."

Rubric reminders

ROW	ONE-LINE REMINDER
Thesis	A claim about meaning, not a restatement or a list of devices
Evidence and Commentary	Specific words; explain <i>how</i> they work and <i>why</i> they matter; organize by idea
Sophistication	Build Row B first; sustain a tension; do not chase it with fancy words

Part 6: The last week

Seven days out to one day out

DAY	TASK	TIME
7	Timed full MCQ set. Review every miss and label the question type.	75 min
6	One timed Q1; score it with the rubric; write a revised thesis	60 min
5	Redo your five worst MCQ types with the type guides; 15 mixed practice questions	45 min
4	One timed Q2; underline minor characters you used; score it	60 min
3	One timed Q3 on a prompt you have not seen; fill in or revise one prep sheet	60 min
2	Review your mental maps for all three or four works; read your tone-word list and analysis verbs; do one short poem and one short prose passage with the 3-read protocol	45 min
1	Light review only (see the night-before plan below)	30 min

What to prioritize

1. **Your most frequent MCQ miss.** If it is tone, review the tone lists; if it is function of lines, redo those type guides.
2. **Your thesis habit.** Write five “although/yet” theses to five old prompts without writing the essay.
3. **Your Q3 works.** Be able to recite, from memory, four key scenes and five short quotations for each.
4. **Typing speed and Bluebook familiarity.** Do at least one practice in the app.

Do not

- Learn new content you will not use.
- Stay up late to cram.
- Memorize long quotations; use six-word fragments.

Part 7: The night before and test morning

The night before

- Stop studying by early evening. Spend 20 minutes reading your one-page checklists (Part 5 and the rubric reminders).
- Check your logistics: your device is charged and Bluebook is installed and updated; you know your testing room, time, and what you may bring.
- Pack: your device and charger, your admission information, identification, a water bottle, a small snack for the break, a watch if permitted, and layers for temperature.
- Eat a real dinner, move your body a little, and go to bed on time.

The morning of

- Eat breakfast with some protein.
- Arrive early; use the restroom.
- Review nothing new. Read your one-page rubric reminders once and then put them away.
- Take three slow breaths before the exam begins.

During the exam: mindset

- **You are not supposed to know every passage.** The exam uses passages you have never seen. Your job is to read carefully and use the method.
- **A hard passage is hard for everyone.** Mark it, do the line-cited questions, and move on.
- **One bad question does not matter.** Each is worth less than one percent of your multiple-choice score.
- **Write something for every essay.** A weak essay is better than a blank one.
- **Reset between sections.** When the multiple-choice section ends, forget it.

Emergency plans

PROBLEM	WHAT TO DO
You blank on a poem	Reread the title; paraphrase the first sentence; read the questions; they often tell you what the poem is about
You blank on Q3 works	Pick a work you know even moderately well and write what you know about the key term; define the term and be specific
You run out of time in an essay	Write a one-sentence conclusion and stop; spend the last minute adding commentary to your strongest quotation

PROBLEM	WHAT TO DO
You panic	Breathe in for four seconds, out for six; then reread the prompt and begin with the first small step

Part 8: A final one-page checklist

Multiple choice

- ☐ Preview stems; mark line numbers and EXCEPT
- ☐ Read the passage once with gists; mark the turn
- ☐ Answer line-cited items first; reread a line either side
- ☐ Predict before you look; eliminate extremes and half-right
- ☐ Whole-passage items last
- ☐ About 11 minutes per passage; never blank

Free response

- ☐ Underline the target (and “complex” or the key term)
- ☐ Read three times; bracket the turn
- ☐ N-F-I; thesis with “although/yet”
- ☐ Organize by idea, not device
- ☐ Short quotations; commentary at least twice as long
- ☐ Explain how, then why
- ☐ Return to the work as a whole (Q3); include the minor character (Q2); address the turn (Q1)
- ☐ Reread for grammar; never leave an essay blank

You have prepared. Trust the method, read closely, and write what you notice.

Want a plan built around **your** student?

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