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AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

Verbs for Analysis and Commentary Language

A working toolkit of 100 precise verbs for describing what writers, speakers, narrators, and characters do, plus ready-made phrases for discussing effect, hedging, complexity, shifts, and structure. Use it while drafting timed essays and while revising practice essays, replacing "shows," "uses," and "talks about" with verbs that carry an interpretation.

Why Verbs Decide Your Score

Look at two sentences about the same line of poetry.

Weak: The poet uses a metaphor to show that the speaker is sad.

Stronger: By casting grief as a tenant who "will not leave," the speaker reveals how mourning has become an unwelcome permanence in his own house.

The first sentence has a vague verb ("uses," "show") and a vague result ("sad"). The second has a verb that names a particular act of the language ("casting," "reveals") and a result that interprets. The AP rubric rewards the second kind of sentence, because Row B asks you to explain *how* evidence supports your reasoning and *how* literary techniques contribute to meaning. Verbs are where that explanation lives.

Chief Reader reports repeatedly describe the same weakness: students name devices but do not say what they do. A strong verb forces the thought. If you write "the imagery *unsettles* the reader's expectation," you have to say what the expectation was.

The CED builds its skills on a family of verbs: *identify, describe, explain, distinguish, develop*. This document gives you the next layer: the verbs that sit inside your commentary.

Two rules before the lists:

1. **Match the verb to the real action.** A metaphor does not "prove." An ironic aside does not "scream." Choose the verb that matches the actual effect of the specific technique.
2. **Use the present tense** for literary analysis ("Austen mocks," not "Austen mocked"), and make the author, speaker, narrator, or the text itself the subject.

Subjects to rotate: *the speaker, the narrator, the poet, the writer (author's name), the passage, the poem, the final stanza, the shift, the syntax, the repetition, the image, the diction*. Do not always use "the author." A text can act as well: "The couplet *undercuts* the quatrains."

Part 1: 100 Verbs, Grouped by What They Do

Each verb gets a short gloss and a model sentence. Most model sentences use original examples, so you can see the verb in action without needing a particular text.

A. Verbs of Presenting and Depicting

VERB	WHAT IT MEANS IN ANALYSIS	MODEL SENTENCE
portrays	Presents a subject in a particular light	The narrator portrays the clerk as a man shrinking inside his own routine.
depicts	Renders in vivid detail	The first stanza depicts the harbor as a place of waiting rather than arrival.
renders	Gives shape to, makes concrete	The sentence renders fatigue as a physical weight: "her arms ached with the effort of staying kind."
presents	Offers to the reader	The passage presents the house as both refuge and trap.
characterizes	Defines a character through details	Dialogue characterizes the father as someone who can only love by instructing.
dramatizes	Makes an idea live in action or scene	The scene dramatizes the speaker's indecision by interrupting every decision with a new objection.
captures	Succeeds in conveying an elusive quality	The fragments capture the stutter of a mind refusing to finish its thought.
evokes	Calls up a feeling or memory	The smell of wet wool evokes a childhood the speaker has lost.
conjures	Summons vividly, almost magically	The final image conjures a figure the speaker cannot quite see.
illustrates	Makes clear through an example	The anecdote illustrates how small cruelties become habits.
embodies	Gives concrete form to an abstraction	The old gardener embodies the patience the speaker lacks.
personifies	Gives human form to a non-human thing	The poem personifies winter as an inattentive landlord.

B. Verbs of Revealing and Exposing

VERB	WHAT IT MEANS IN ANALYSIS	MODEL SENTENCE
reveals	Makes visible what was hidden	The slip into the present tense reveals that the memory has not ended.
exposes	Uncovers something concealed, often unflattering	The narrator's praise exposes his own vanity.
discloses	Lets something be known	The aside discloses what the speaker will not say aloud.
betrays	Unintentionally gives away	The speaker's insistence betrays how much he doubts.
uncovers	Brings to light	The final line uncovers the fear beneath the humor.
underscores	Emphasizes by marking	The repetition of "again" underscores the cycle.
highlights	Draws attention to	The contrast highlights the gap between what she has and what she wants.
signals	Indicates a change or meaning	The dash signals a sudden hesitation.
foreshadows	Hints at what is to come	The unnatural calm of the opening foreshadows the quarrel.
implies	Suggests without stating	The omission of her name implies that he has already stopped counting her as family.
suggests	Offers a possible meaning	The choice of "retreat" over "walk" suggests defeat.
hints	Suggests slightly	The slightly late arrival of the verb hints at reluctance.
reflects	Mirrors or shows	The broken syntax reflects the speaker's disordered thinking.
mirrors	Closely echoes	The stanza's collapse mirrors the collapse it describes.
enacts	Performs, rather than merely describes	The line break enacts the fall it names.

C. Verbs of Contrast, Tension, and Complication

VERB	WHAT IT MEANS IN ANALYSIS	MODEL SENTENCE
juxtaposes	Places side by side for comparison	The poem juxtaposes the festival's noise with the speaker's silence.
contrasts	Sets in opposition	The narrator contrasts public cheer with private doubt.
complicates	Makes less simple	The final couplet complicates the earlier praise.
undercuts	Weakens by contradicting	A single ironic adjective undercuts the narrator's pious tone.
undermines	Erodes the foundation of	The qualifying clause undermines the confidence of the sentence.
subverts	Overturns expectation	The ending subverts the conventions of the love poem.
qualifies	Limits or modifies	The parenthetical qualifies the speaker's boast.
tempers	Moderates	Humor tempers the grief without erasing it.
destabilizes	Makes unsteady	The shift in person destabilizes the reader's trust in the narrator.
interrogates	Questions closely	The poem interrogates the comfort of nostalgia.
challenges	Calls into question	The scene challenges the idea that sacrifice always ennobles.
resists	Refuses	The speaker resists the consolation that the poem keeps offering.
disrupts	Breaks the flow	A sudden short sentence disrupts the lull of the description.
tempts	Draws toward	The warm imagery tempts the reader to accept the speaker's version.
reconciles	Brings opposites together	The last stanza reconciles longing with acceptance.
oscillates	Moves back and forth	The speaker oscillates between pride and shame.

D. Verbs of Building and Developing

VERB	WHAT IT MEANS IN ANALYSIS	MODEL SENTENCE
builds	Constructs gradually	Each clause builds the pressure of the argument.
develops	Extends and deepens	The extended metaphor develops the idea of marriage as a long voyage.
intensifies	Increases force	The repeated verbs intensify the sense of pursuit.
amplifies	Increases the scale or volume	The echo amplifies the loneliness.
accumulates	Gathers detail over time	The list accumulates small humiliations into a larger one.
escalates	Rises by degrees	The quarrel escalates through shorter and shorter sentences.
culminates	Reaches a high point	The sequence culminates in a single bare image.
sustains	Keeps going	The conceit sustains a single comparison across fourteen lines.
establishes	Sets up firmly	The opening establishes a formal register the later lines will break.
anchors	Fixes in place	A concrete image anchors the abstract claim.
frames	Surrounds or sets the lens	The opening paragraph frames the story as a confession.
structures	Gives organization	A pattern of questions structures the speaker's argument.
shapes	Gives form to	Syntax shapes the reader's sense of speed.
cultivates	Develops carefully	The narrator cultivates a tone of confiding intimacy.
sets up	Prepares	The first quatrain sets up an expectation the sestet will break.
sets in motion	Starts a process	The question sets in motion the poem's whole argument.

E. Verbs of Persuading, Asserting, and Arguing

VERB	WHAT IT MEANS IN ANALYSIS	MODEL SENTENCE
asserts	States with confidence	The speaker asserts that memory is a kind of ownership.
argues	Builds a case	The poem argues that attention is a form of love.
insists	Maintains despite resistance	The repeated “I will” insists on a certainty the images do not support.
contends	Maintains in argument	The narrator contends that the village deserves its reputation.
maintains	Holds a position	He maintains a courteous surface while the syntax loosens.
concedes	Admits a point	The speaker concedes that the town was kind, but only in passing.
acknowledges	Recognizes	The final stanza acknowledges what the first refused to say.
dismisses	Treats as unimportant	The narrator dismisses the villagers’ fear in a single clause.
rebukes	Reproves sharply	The voice of the elder rebukes the young man’s pride.
mocks	Ridicules	The narrator mocks the parlor’s solemnity by describing it as “very well kept.”
satirizes	Ridicules to expose folly	The scene satirizes charity performed for an audience.
idealizes	Treats as perfect	The speaker idealizes the past by editing its pain.
justifies	Defends as right	The Duke justifies his control as taste.
rationalizes	Invents reasons to excuse	She rationalizes the delay as prudence.
appeals to	Directs at the reader’s feelings or values	The detail of the child’s coat appeals to the reader’s pity.
invites	Encourages the reader to	The open ending invites the reader to decide.

F. Verbs of Feeling and Attitude (what speakers and characters do)

VERB	WHAT IT MEANS IN ANALYSIS	MODEL SENTENCE
laments	Expresses grief	The speaker laments the closing of the old mill.
mourns	Grieves	The last stanza mourns what the first stanza took for granted.
celebrates	Honors joyfully	The poem celebrates ordinary labor.
venerates	Honors deeply	The narrator venerates the grandmother's silence.
yearns for	Longs intensely for	The speaker yearns for a certainty she can only name.
resents	Feels bitter about	He resents the debt he cannot name.
fears	Feels dread	The syntax fears the end of its sentence.
hesitates	Pauses reluctantly	The speaker hesitates before the word "home."
withholds	Refuses to give	The narrator withholds the cause of the quarrel.
confesses	Admits	The narrator confesses, between clauses, that he never forgave.
projects	Casts own feelings outward	The speaker projects his guilt onto the landscape.
recoils	Draws back	The image of the closed door makes the reader recoil with the speaker.
savors	Enjoys slowly	Long vowels let the speaker savor each detail of the meal.
grapples with	Struggles with	The soliloquy grapples with the cost of a choice.
reconsiders	Thinks again	In the third stanza, the speaker reconsiders the earlier boast.
relents	Gives in	The speaker finally relents and names her grief.

G. Verbs of Shifting, Ordering, and Structuring

VERB	WHAT IT MEANS IN ANALYSIS	MODEL SENTENCE
shifts	Changes direction	The tone shifts at "but" from admiration to doubt.
pivots	Turns on a central point	The poem pivots on a single conjunction.
transitions	Moves from one state to another	The narrator transitions from description to judgment.
turns	Changes direction	The sonnet turns at line 9.
moves	Progresses	The passage moves from outer scene to inner thought.
deflates	Lets the air out	The final couplet deflates the speaker's grandeur.
resolves	Settles	The last line resolves the poem's question.
withholds (structural)	Delays information	The structure withholds the cause until the final paragraph.
delays	Postpones	A subordinate clause delays the verb and, with it, the speaker's admission.
interrupts	Breaks into	The parenthetical interrupts the reflection with a correction.
echoes	Repeats with a difference	The last line echoes the first, now with new weight.
returns to	Circles back	The final image returns to the opening, altered.
closes	Ends	The couplet closes the argument with an unexpected concession.

Part 2: Phrases for Discussing Effect and Meaning

A verb names the action. These phrases then explain its effect. Use them to complete the sentence after the evidence.

Phrases that explain how language works

- "...which casts [X] as [Y], thereby *emphasizing*..."
- "...a choice that *aligns* the reader with the speaker's view..."
- "...a pairing that *forces* the reader to hold two feelings at once."

- "...a word whose connotations of ___ *complicate* its surface meaning."
- "...a syntactic pattern that *delays* resolution until the final clause."
- "...an image that *recasts* the earlier description as ___."
- "...a rhythm that *slows* the line, forcing the reader to linger on ___."
- "...a sound pattern that *binds* [X] to [Y]."
- "...a tone that *distances* the narrator from the events."
- "...a detail that *quietly* shows ___ rather than stating it."

Phrases that link evidence to the thesis

- "This detail matters because it *shows that* [the thesis term] is ___."
- "The effect is to *transform* [X] from ___ into ___."
- "In this way, the passage *reinforces* the idea that ___."
- "This moment *recasts* everything before it."
- "Here, [X] *becomes* a way of ___."
- "What looks like [surface reading] is in fact [deeper reading]."
- "This is not simply [obvious reading] but [fuller reading]."
- "The speaker *turns* [X] into evidence of ___."

Phrases for results ("so what")

- "...thereby *deepening* our sense of ___."
- "...leaving the reader to *feel* ___ even as the speaker *denies* it."
- "...so that the reader *experiences* the ___ the speaker describes."
- "...a gesture that *reframes* the entire relationship."
- "...suggesting that the speaker *cannot* ___."
- "...asking the reader to *reconsider* ___."

Part 3: Hedging and Qualification Language

AP readers reward interpretations that are defensible, not dogmatic. Hedging used well shows that you see a text's difficulty. Hedging used badly sounds timid. The goal is calibrated confidence.

Calibrated hedges (use sparingly, one or two per essay)

PHRASE	USE
"suggests" / "implies"	The default; the text offers a clue but not a statement
"can be read as"	You are offering one fair reading, not claiming it is the only one
"seems to"	The surface reading, which you are about to complicate
"appears to ... but"	The standard setup for a complexity move

PHRASE	USE
"at least in part"	Limits scope; avoids overclaiming
"to some extent"	Acknowledges partial truth
"arguably"	Signals an interpretive claim; do not overuse
"perhaps"	A real doubt; use when the text allows more than one explanation

Over-hedging to avoid

- "It could possibly be argued that maybe the speaker might feel..." (cut all but one hedge)
- "In my opinion..." (the whole essay is your opinion; delete)
- "One may or may not agree that..." (empty)

Stronger alternatives

Instead of: "The poem may be about loss." Write: "The poem *treats* loss as a habit rather than an event."

Part 4: Complexity Language ("at once ... and ...")

The AP prompts ask about a *complex* attitude, experience, or portrayal. A complex reading holds two things at once. These frames build that structure in a single sentence.

Frames for holding two truths

- "The speaker is **at once** [X] **and** [Y]."
- "**Even as** the speaker [does X], [he/she] [does Y]."
- "**Although** [surface reading], the [element] reveals [deeper reading]."
- "**Not simply** [obvious], **but** [fuller]."
- "[X] **yet** [Y]."
- "**While** [first view] seems [true], [the text] also [complicates it]."
- "**Rather than** [expected response], the speaker [surprising response]."
- "**Paradoxically**, [the very thing that seems to X also Y]."
- "[X] **and, at the same time**, [Y]."
- "The [word] **carries both** [meaning 1] **and** [meaning 2]."
- "**On one level ... on another ...**"
- "**Beneath** the [surface], [deeper layer]."

Model sentences (original)

- The speaker is at once grateful for the shelter and resentful of the debt it creates.
- Even as the narrator praises the town's order, her verbs ("settled," "fixed," "kept") imply a stillness close to death.

- Rather than mourning the lost farm, the speaker inventories it, a method of grief that treats memory as accounting.
- Paradoxically, the speaker's insistence on forgetting keeps the memory vivid.
- The word "keep" carries both possession and obligation, so that the inheritance is also a burden.

Words that mark complexity

tension, paradox, ambivalence, contradiction, irony, ambiguity, duality, double meaning, self-deception, rationalization, resistance, qualification, concession

Part 5: Words and Phrases for Shifts and Structure

Shifts are the most tested structural idea. You need vocabulary to describe where a text turns and what changes.

Naming the shift

WHAT CHANGED	PHRASES
Tone	"The tone turns from ___ to "; "the register hardens"; "the speaker's warmth cools into "
Subject	"The poem pivots from [subject A] to [subject B]"
Time	"The shift from past to present tense collapses the distance between then and now"
Speaker or addressee	"The poem turns from addressing the reader to addressing the beloved"
Image	"The imagery moves from [natural] to [mechanical]"
Syntax	"Long, flowing sentences give way to short, abrupt ones"
Argument	"The third stanza reverses the claim of the first"

Signal words for turns

but, yet, still, however, though, although, nevertheless, instead, now, then, suddenly, at last, and yet, for all that.

Structural phrases for topic sentences

- "In the opening lines, ..."
- "As the passage progresses, ..."
- "By the final stanza, ..."
- "At the volta, ..."
- "In contrast to the opening image, ..."
- "Midway through the passage, ..."
- "The closing sentence returns to ..."

- "Where the first paragraph , **the second** ."

Describing structure by function

STRUCTURE	FUNCTION PHRASES
Opening	establishes, sets up, frames, introduces, grounds
Middle	complicates, develops, deepens, tests, interrupts
Turn	reverses, redirects, undercuts, qualifies, reframes
Ending	resolves, withholds resolution, returns to, closes on, leaves open

Part 6: Verbs and Phrases to Retire

These words are overused and carry little meaning on their own. Each has a stronger replacement.

RETIRE	BECAUSE	USE INSTEAD
"uses"	Says nothing about the effect	"casts," "builds," "deploys," "relies on"
"shows"	Vague	"reveals," "exposes," "dramatizes"
"talks about"	Informal	"addresses," "explores," "meditates on"
"says"	Plot-level	"asserts," "admits," "insists"
"makes the reader feel"	Unspecific	"evokes," "unsettles," "prepares the reader to"
"helps to"	Weak	Remove it; use the verb directly
"talks"	Informal	"speaks of," "describes"
"is about"	Topic only	"treats," "examines," "argues that"
"has a lot of imagery"	Counts, not analyzes	Name the image and its effect
"adds"	Vague	"layers," "deepens," "complicates"
"very," "really"	Empty intensifiers	Choose a stronger word
"this shows that the author is good at"	Not analysis	Delete and analyze

Part 7: Putting It Together, Three Rewrites

Study how verbs transform a flat sentence. These rewrites use original examples.

Rewrite 1: from naming to explaining.

Before: The author uses repetition to show the speaker is nervous.

After: The repetition of "I am ready" *undercuts* itself: the more the speaker *insists*, the more the phrase *betrays* the nervousness it tries to conceal.

Rewrite 2: from summary to interpretation.

Before: In the second paragraph, the narrator describes the house as old and cold.

After: In the second paragraph, the narrator *renders* the house as a body that has stopped warming itself, *recasting* the family's silence as a kind of illness.

Rewrite 3: from simple to complex.

Before: The speaker is happy but also sad.

After: The speaker *celebrates* the reunion, yet the quiet verbs of the closing lines ("settled," "left," "kept") *hint* at an ending the celebration cannot hold off.

Part 8: A Daily Practice Routine

You do not own a verb until you have used it in your own sentence. A ten-minute routine, repeated, will build your range.

1. **Choose five verbs** from the lists above that you do not usually use.
2. **Choose any short poem or paragraph.**
3. **Write one sentence per verb** about a specific line, using the format: *verb + evidence + effect*.
4. **Revise one sentence** by replacing the verb with a stronger one and noting what changes in meaning.
5. **Keep a running list** of the verbs you use well, and retire one weak verb per week.

Mini-quiz: choose the strongest verb

Read each sentence frame and choose the verb that best fits the described effect. Answers follow.

1. The speaker's insistence on being fine _____ how unwell she is.
a. shows (b) betrays (c) says (d) uses
2. The final couplet _____ the sonnet's earlier confidence.
a. undercuts (b) mentions (c) tells (d) adds
3. The narrator _____ the whole scene as a trial.
a. talks (b) frames (c) is (d) has
4. The long, trailing sentence _____ the exhaustion it describes.
a. does (b) enacts (c) makes (d) goes
5. The repeated "again" _____ the sense of a cycle.
a. underscores (b) is (c) writes (d) hopes
6. The speaker _____ the past, editing its pain until only the pleasant details remain.

- a. idealizes (b) points (c) fears (d) keeps
7. The abrupt dash _____ the speaker's sudden hesitation.
- a. signals (b) wants (c) tells (d) goes
8. The speaker _____ the consolation that the poem keeps offering.
- a. resists (b) takes (c) gets (d) makes

Answer Key

1. b. betrays: the speaker's words unintentionally give away the opposite.
2. a. undercuts: a couplet that contradicts what came before.
3. b. frames: the narrator sets the lens through which the reader sees.
4. b. enacts: the sentence performs the exhaustion rather than describing it.
5. a. underscores: repetition emphasizes a pattern.
6. a. idealizes: editing pain to leave only pleasant details is idealization.
7. a. signals: punctuation marks the shift.
8. a. resists: the speaker refuses what the poem offers.

Quick Reference Card

Core pattern for every commentary sentence:

[Subject] + [precise verb] + [specific element] + [effect on meaning].

Complexity frames to memorize: *at once ... and ...; even as ...; although ... yet ...; not simply ... but ...; paradoxically ...; rather than ...*

Five best all-purpose verbs when you are stuck: *reveals, complicates, juxtaposes, undercuts, enacts.*

One test for every sentence: Does the verb tell the reader what the language does, or merely that it exists? If the second, replace it.

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