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AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

Essay Planners: Poetry, Prose, Literary Argument + Major Works Data Sheet

One-page planners for each of the three AP Literature essays, a Major Works Data Sheet template with a completed example, a timed-writing reflection sheet, and a peer-review checklist keyed to the rubric rows.

How to use these planners

Fill in a planner in about five minutes, in fragments. A planner is a way to decide what you believe about the text *before* you begin to write. If you cannot fill a box, that is a sign to look at the text again, not to start writing.

All three essays are scored on the same 6-point rubric:

- **Row A, thesis (0–1):** a defensible interpretation that responds to the prompt.
- **Row B, evidence and commentary (0–4):** specific evidence and an explanation of how it supports the interpretation. (On Question 3, the commentary does not need to name literary techniques, though it must show how the evidence supports the argument.)
- **Row C, sophistication (0–1):** a sustained understanding of tensions or contradictions, a broader context, an alternative interpretation, or an especially vivid and persuasive style.

Planner 1: Poetry analysis (Question 1)

Time plan: about 5 minutes reading and planning, about 30 minutes writing, a few minutes to revise.

Blank planner

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Prompt (what is the “complex” thing I must analyze?)	
Paraphrase (what happens, sentence by sentence)	
Speaker and situation	
Where the poem shifts (line, signal, what changes)	

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Noticing 1 → Function → Interpretation	
Noticing 2 → Function → Interpretation	
Noticing 3 → Function → Interpretation	
Thesis (a defensible interpretation, with an “although... yet...” shape if possible)	
Body paragraph plan (organized by <i>idea</i> , not by device)	
Sophistication move	

Filled example

Poem (public domain): Emily Dickinson, “Hope is the thing with feathers” (c. 1861).

“Hope” is the thing with feathers — That perches in the soul — And sings the tune without the words —
And never stops — at all —

And sweetest — in the Gale — is heard — And sore must be the storm — That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm —

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land — And on the strangest Sea — Yet — never — in Extremity, It asked a crumb
— of me.

Prompt (written for this guide): Analyze how Dickinson uses literary elements and techniques to convey a complex understanding of hope.

BOX	NOTES
Complex thing	The poem’s “complex understanding of hope”
Paraphrase	Hope is like a bird that lives in the soul and sings without words and never stops. It is sweetest in a storm, and only a terrible storm could silence it. The speaker has heard it in the coldest places and on strange seas, yet it never asked for anything in return.
Speaker and situation	A reflective speaker who has endured hardship and testifies from experience (“I’ve heard it”)
Shift	The first two stanzas describe what hope is and does; the last stanza turns to the speaker’s personal testimony (“I’ve heard it... Yet...”), where hope gives without asking
N-F-I 1	Hope is a bird “that perches in the soul” → the metaphor makes an abstract feeling small, alive, and tender → hope is not a grand force but a quiet, living presence.

BOX	NOTES
N-F-I 2	The bird sings “the tune without the words” → hope needs no language → hope is felt rather than argued, which is why it is hard to silence by reasoning.
N-F-I 3	“Yet — never — in Extremity, / It asked a crumb — of me” → the dashes slow the line and the hard final turn credits hope with generosity → hope costs the speaker nothing, even at the worst moment.
Thesis	Dickinson presents hope as both fragile and unbreakable: through an extended bird metaphor, a shift from general description to personal testimony, and a final claim that hope demands nothing in return, she suggests that what looks like the smallest comfort proves the most durable.
Body plan	(1) The metaphor makes hope small and living. (2) The storm imagery tests it and shows endurance. (3) The final stanza reveals its generosity.
Sophistication	Tension: the “little Bird” seems fragile but outlasts every storm; the poem holds both truths at once.

Planner 2: Prose fiction analysis (Question 2)

Time plan: about 5 minutes reading and planning, about 30 minutes writing, a few minutes to revise.

Blank planner

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Prompt (what am I analyzing: a character’s complexity, a relationship, an attitude?)	
Situation (who, where, when, what is happening)	
Narration (point of view, reliability, distance)	
Where the passage turns	
Noticing 1 → Function → Interpretation	
Noticing 2 → Function → Interpretation	
Noticing 3 → Function → Interpretation	
Thesis	
Body paragraph plan	
Sophistication move	

Filled example

Passage (public domain): Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), opening of Chapter 1.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

Prompt (written for this guide): Analyze how Austen uses literary elements and techniques to characterize the society she depicts.

BOX	NOTES
Complex thing	The society's attitude toward marriage and money
Situation	An omniscient narrator opens a novel and comments on a social assumption
Narration	A confident, ironic narrator who stands above the characters
Turn	From the grand general statement to the narrator's wry suggestion that the "truth" is really a mother's hope
N-F-I 1	"truth universally acknowledged" → inflated diction → mocks society's confident assumptions
N-F-I 2	"possession" and "want" → economic language → marriage is framed as a transaction
N-F-I 3	The delayed main clause → the joke lands on the last word, "wife" → the balanced structure reinforces the ironic tone
Thesis	Austen characterizes her society as one that dresses economic ambition in the language of universal truth, using inflated diction, commercial vocabulary, and the delayed syntax of a mock-serious sentence to expose the gap between what society claims and what it wants.
Body plan	(1) Inflated diction and irony. (2) Economic vocabulary. (3) Syntax and the narrator's stance.
Sophistication	The narrator uses the same assumption she mocks as the engine of the plot, so the novel both critiques and relies on it.

Planner 3: Literary argument (Question 3)

Time plan: about 5 minutes planning, about 30–35 minutes writing.

Blank planner

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Prompt concept (in my own words)	
Candidate works (two or three)	
Chosen work and why it fits best	
Key scenes or details I can use as evidence	
Thesis (about the <i>work as a whole</i> , not a plot summary)	
Paragraph 1 idea + evidence + commentary	
Paragraph 2 idea + evidence + commentary	
Paragraph 3 idea + evidence + commentary	
Sophistication move	

Filled example

Prompt concept (written for this guide): A character who keeps a secret. Analyze how the secret and its consequences contribute to an interpretation of the work as a whole.

Chosen work: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818), a public-domain novel.

BOX	NOTES
Concept	A secret that shapes a character's choices and the plot
Candidates	<i>Frankenstein</i> , <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> , <i>Jane Eyre</i>
Choice and why	<i>Frankenstein</i> : Victor's secret (the creature's existence) drives the tragedy and lets the novel explore responsibility and isolation.
Evidence	Victor keeps the creation secret; he stays silent when Justine is accused of William's murder; his isolation deepens as the secret spreads.
Thesis	In <i>Frankenstein</i> , Victor's silence about his creation turns a scientific act into a moral failure, suggesting that the greatest harm comes not from ambition alone but from the refusal to take responsibility for its results.
Para 1	The secret begins as ambition and shame: Victor hides his work from his family, which cuts him off from the people who might restrain him.
Para 2	The secret becomes complicity: Victor's silence at Justine's trial allows an innocent person to be condemned.

BOX	NOTES
Para 3	The secret becomes isolation: by the end, his silence has left him with no one but the creature he made.
Sophistication	Tension: the creature's own demand for a hearing mirrors Victor's silence, so the novel suggests that secrecy and neglect produce each other.

Major Works Data Sheet

Prepare one sheet for each of 3–4 novels or plays you may use on Question 3. Fill in details you can write from memory. A good data sheet lets you build an argument for almost any prompt.

Blank template

FIELD	YOUR NOTES
Title, author, date	
Genre and setting	
Main characters (with one-line descriptions)	
Plot in five sentences	
Central conflicts	
Major themes	
Key symbols, motifs, images	
Narrative structure and point of view	
Five scenes I can use as evidence	
Three quotations I can paraphrase or quote accurately	
Prompts it fits (e.g., secrets, conflict between desire and duty, a place as character, a flawed hero)	

Completed example: *Frankenstein*

FIELD	NOTES
Title, author, date	<i>Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus</i> , Mary Shelley, 1818
Genre and setting	Gothic and science fiction; Switzerland, Germany, Britain, and the Arctic

FIELD	NOTES
Main characters	Victor Frankenstein (the scientist); the creature (his creation); Robert Walton (the explorer who frames the story); Elizabeth (Victor's fiancée); Henry Clerval (his friend); Justine Moritz (a servant wrongly executed)
Plot	Walton, exploring the Arctic, rescues Victor, who tells his story. Victor creates a living being and abandons it in horror. The creature, rejected by humanity, seeks revenge and kills those Victor loves. Victor pursues the creature across the world and dies; the creature vows to end his own life.
Conflicts	Creator versus creation; ambition versus responsibility; individual versus society; isolation versus connection
Themes	The limits of ambition; responsibility for what we create; the need for companionship; the danger of isolation; the question of what makes someone monstrous
Symbols and images	Fire and light (knowledge, danger); the Arctic (isolation, extremes); the creature's yearning (the cost of rejection)
Structure and point of view	A frame narrative: Walton's letters hold Victor's story, which holds the creature's own narrative, so three voices test one another
Scenes	Victor's creation of the creature; the creature's account of learning language and being rejected; Justine's trial; the pursuit across the Arctic; Walton's final encounter with the creature
Quotations to know	Paraphrase the creature's plea for a companion and his statement that he was made benevolent but became a fiend through misery.
Prompts it fits	Secrets; guilt and responsibility; the outsider; the pursuit of knowledge; the monstrous; isolation; nature of the creator-creation relationship

Timed-writing reflection sheet

Fill this out within an hour of every timed essay.

QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER
Prompt and date	
Time spent planning / writing / revising	
Did my thesis offer a defensible interpretation?	

QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER
Where did I summarize instead of interpret?	
Which evidence was strongest? Weakest?	
Did each paragraph explain <i>how</i> the evidence supports my claim?	
Did I attempt a sophistication move, and was it sustained?	
One thing to do differently next time	

Peer-review checklist (by rubric row)

Mark each line "yes," "partly," or "no," and give one sentence of evidence for each "no."

Row A: Thesis - Does the thesis offer an interpretation rather than restate the prompt or describe the plot? - Is it defensible (a reader could disagree or the text could support more than one reading)? - For Question 1 and 2, does it name how the techniques build the meaning?

Row B: Evidence and commentary - Is each paragraph built on specific evidence from the text? - Does the commentary explain *how* each piece of evidence supports the claim (not just "this shows")? - Do the paragraphs build a line of reasoning rather than list devices?

Row C: Sophistication - Does the essay explore a tension or contradiction, an alternative interpretation, a broader context, or a particularly vivid style? - Is it sustained rather than a single sentence?

Score the essay

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

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