

AP English Study Skills

How to Prepare for AP English Examinations

You've been studying for years, almost since the days you got out of Dr. Seuss books. Is there some new, exotic set of study skills you need to do well in Advanced Placement courses and exams? No...and yes. No, because the general skills of reading and writing you've gained are fundamental for advanced work. Yes, because AP courses are at a college level. They require more complex skills at a higher level of difficulty.

Following is a quick study primer with tips on reading and writing, as well as preparing for AP English Examinations.

Reading

In AP English, you may feel you have never been given so much to read. AP English demands plenty of serious reading, and you might be tempted to "speed-read." You may try to scan paragraphs and pages as fast as you can while hunting for main ideas. In a word: Don't. First, main ideas usually aren't quickly accessible from "speed-reading" complex texts.

Also, if you race through good writing, you are likely to miss the subtlety and complexity. A paragraph of text by Frederick Douglass or Joyce Carol Oates, a poem by Auden, or a drama by Shakespeare cannot be appreciated—or even minimally understood—without careful, often-repeated readings.

In reading your AP assignments, keep in mind to:

- Read slowly
- Reread complex and important sentences
- Ask yourself often, "What does this sentence, paragraph, speech, stanza, or chapter mean?"

Make Your Reading Efficient

How can you balance the careful reading AP English requires with your demanding chemistry and calculus workloads, plus get in play practice, soccer games, and whatever else you've got on your busy schedule? We've compiled some helpful tips to make your AP reading more efficient, fun, and productive.

Get a head start. Obtain copies of as many assigned texts as you can. Then you won't waste time searching for a text when you absolutely need it.

➤ *Preview important reading assignments.*

By previewing, you carefully note:

- the exact title
- the author's name
- the table of contents
- the preface or introduction—this section often states the author's purpose and themes
- in essays and certain types of prose, the final paragraph(s).

➤ *Pause to consider the author's principal ideas and the material the author uses to support them.*

Such ideas may be fairly easy to identify in writings of critical essayists or journalists, but much more subtle in the works of someone like Virginia Woolf or Emily Dickinson.

➤ *Know the context of a piece of writing.*

This technique will help you read with greater understanding and better recollection. A knowledge of the period in which the authors lived and wrote enhances your understanding of what they have tried to say and how well they succeeded. When you read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, find other sources to learn about the horrible conditions for migrant laborers in California in the 1930s.

➤ *Read text aloud.*

Slow down when you are having trouble with poetry or important passages, and read them aloud. You can more easily determine tone, for example.

➤ *Reread difficult material to help you understand it.*

Complex issues and elegant expression are not always easily caught on a first reading. Form the habit of consulting your dictionary, the thesaurus, the encyclopedia, the atlas, and the globe. Through these resources, you'll discover new ideas and knowledge. Lots of high-quality computer software is available, too.

To understand and appreciate much of English and American literature, you should have some acquaintance with the major themes of Judaic and Christian religious traditions and with Greek and Roman mythology. These religious concepts and stories have influenced and informed first English and then American literary traditions from the Middle Ages through modern times.

If you are studying Literature and Composition, you should also study extensively several representative works from various genres and periods from the Renaissance forward. You are advised to concentrate on works of recognized literary merit, worthy of scrutiny because of their richness of thought and language.

Writing

Writing is central to both AP English courses and examinations. Both courses have but two goals, to provide you with opportunities to become skilled, mature, critical readers and practiced, logical, clear, and honest writers.

In AP English, writing is taught as “process”—that is, thinking, planning, drafting the text, reviewing, discussing, redrafting, editing, polishing, and finishing. It’s also important that AP students learn to write “on call” or “on demand.” Learning to write critical or expository essays on call takes time and practice.

Here are some key guidelines to remember in learning to write a critical essay:

- *Make use of the text given to you to analyze.*
- *Quote judiciously from it to support your observations.*
- *Be logical in your exposition of ideas.*
- *Use evidence from the text to strengthen your analysis.*

If you acquire these skills—organizing ideas, marshalling evidence, being logical in analysis, and using the text judiciously—you should have little trouble writing your essays on the AP Examination. Practice in other kinds of writing—narrative, argument, exposition, and personal writing—all have their place alongside practice in writing on demand.

As you study and practice writing, you’ll want to consider the following points.

Your reading directly influences your writing skills and habits. If you sat down and read the complete three-volume edition of Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and wrote a paper about it, your writing style would probably take on the sound of Gibbon’s with great series of elegant phrases and clauses and an elevated, lofty tone. Read with omnivorous relish and you won’t even have to be taught how to write. It will come naturally.

Writing at its best is great fun. When you have penned what you think is a great sentence or clean, logical paragraph, read it over to yourself out loud. Enjoy it. Delight in the ideas, savor the diction, and let the phrases and clauses roll around in your mind. Claim it as part of your self. You will discover you have a voice worthy of respect.

Take a tip from E. M. Forster. He is reputed to have said that he never knew clearly what it was he thought until he spoke it; and once he had said it, he never knew clearly what it was that he said until he had written it down. Then, Forster noted, he could play with it and give it final form. Be like Forster: think, speak, write, analyze your writing, give it final shape.

Think of grammar, mechanics, and rhetoric as tools, aids, props. Think of them as elements that you can order to clean up your ideas, to sharpen your statements, to make your words and sentences glisten and stick.

Get well-acquainted with the vocabulary. Writers and critical readers have a “technical vocabulary” they use when

talking about language, drama, poetry, and fiction. Compile a list of such words. Notice writing that uses the right vocabulary and why. Words you should already know include: *syntax, tone, rhetoric, attitude, antecedent, denouement, exposition, climax, atmosphere, voice, speaker, stock character, thesis, ideology, persuasion, paradox, allusion, ambivalence, syllogism, and aphorism.*

When writing, think about audience. Your teachers may specify an audience that you are supposed to keep in mind when writing a paper. Most of us in daily life are not writing for a particular person or audience, but rather for someone called “the general reader.” The general reader is someone, anyone, who possesses an average intelligence and has a fairly sound general education. This general reader is interested in the events of the day and in the world as a whole. He or she has a good measure of sympathy for humankind, appreciates the happy as well as the unhappy accidents of life. This reader also is blessed with a good sense of humor and the ability to listen to others, to writers like you in fact. Keep the general reader in mind when you write.

How to Prepare for AP English Examinations

During your AP English course, your teacher will probably assess how well you and your fellow students are mastering important knowledge and skills. Your teacher will gather this information through questions and quizzes, class reports, projects or papers, and, of course, tests.

Besides these teacher-prepared assessments, the Advanced Placement Program provides a standardized final exam in May. Unlike most exams prepared and graded by your teachers, the AP English Examination allows you to miss or omit quite a few questions on the multiple-choice section and still receive a good grade.

Keeping up with course work, regular study, and periodic review of major elements in the course constitute the best preparation for taking tests. If you want to master your AP course, remember that material you review periodically and skills you reinforce by practice are far more likely to remain with you than are those that you try to acquire all at once in a brief time period.

But what about Exam Day, what to do if you have sweaty palms and your mind is darting from Auden to Hurston to Wharton quicker than the dash between class and school lockers? Here are some strategies for Exam Day. The first three apply to most exams you might take. The remainder refer specifically to AP Exams.

Pay close attention to directions. Not paying enough attention to test directions can hurt your grade. Remember:

If your teacher says, “Answer one of the three questions in section one and all of the questions in section two,” and you reverse the directions, the grade you receive on the test will probably not reflect accurately what you know about the topics. On the AP Exams, phrases in the multiple-choice

sections like “All the following are . . . EXCEPT” or “Which of the following does NOT . . .” contain critical words. If you don’t pay attention to them, you will not respond correctly to the questions. If you tend to be very nervous during a major exam, it’s especially important to concentrate on the spoken and written directions.

Be careful about the sequence on answer sheets for multiple-choice tests. Even the most experienced test taker can make the critical mistake of getting responses out of sequence. If you’re not careful, you may mark an answer for question 5 when the answer was intended for question 6. This can happen easily when you skip a question. Put a mark in your test book (not on your answer sheet) when you bypass a question. Frequently check to be sure that the number of the question on your answer sheet corresponds to the number of the question in your exam booklet.

Use smart strategies to handle the time limits. Virtually all classroom and standardized tests have time limits. Skilled test takers make a quick estimate of the amount of time the various questions or sections of a test will require and stay aware of the time available throughout the test and concentrate on questions they can respond to best.

On the multiple-choice section of the AP Examinations, for example, you should note the number of questions and the time allotted to them. Move on to the next question if you can’t figure out the answer to the one you are working on. Use all the time available for the AP Examinations. If you finish the exam with time to spare, go back to questions you skipped or answers that you can supplement.

Know the probability for educated guessing. AP Examinations have a scoring adjustment to correct for random guessing. For questions with five answer choices, one-fourth of a point is subtracted for each wrong answer. So if you know absolutely nothing that helps you eliminate even one of the multiple-choice options, you probably won’t come out ahead by guessing at an answer. But if you are fairly sure that even one of the options is wrong, it may be worthwhile to answer the question. Of course, if you can eliminate two or three options as probably incorrect, your chances of gaining credit become even greater.

Specific Strategies for the Free-Response Section

When you are taking the free-response section of the AP English Examinations, be sure to understand what each essay question is asking you to do and then make sure that you answer the question that is asked. Do not write on a topic other than the assigned one.

Your essays will be evaluated on the completeness and the quality of your response to the question. The quality of your response includes both the quality of what you say and the skill with which you say it—the quality of your writing. The best answers will be both perceptive and well-written.

Here are some pointers concerning free-response questions:

- *Know your time limits. Remember that your time on the free-response questions is limited. Plan your answer carefully. Think about the major points that you want to make and the evidence you plan to include to support these statements.*
- *Before you start writing your essay, be sure that you understand the passage or poem (if there is one).*
- *Preparation works. Although the English teachers who score the free-response section will generally be sympathetic if you revise your first reading or understanding of a passage as you write your answer, more preparation early on could save you the need to revise your thinking in the middle of your response.*
- *Substance counts. You need to write enough to answer the question fully and to make your ideas convincing by supporting them with specific details. Long answers are not necessarily the best answers, but answers that are very sketchy or filled with unsupported generalizations usually do not receive the highest scores. In the time allowed for each question, AP English students are usually able to write several substantial paragraphs and to develop their critical analysis at some length.*
- *Take care with revisions. Because of the time limitation in the free-response section, you will not be able to write a rough draft and then recopy your answer. However, space is provided in the exam booklet and in the response booklet to make notes and/or to outline your answer. As you write your essay, you can cross out words and sentences and even insert a part or move it from one section to another.*
- *Try to save a little time for reviewing your essay so that you can edit or revise it slightly. Make sure that any changes you make are clearly marked and legible and that any parts you want to delete are carefully crossed out.*
- *Is it natural for you to be very nervous about the AP English Exam? Yes. It’s understandable to be anxious when you are about to do something on which others will judge your performance. For most people, knowledge is the great moderator of anxiety. The more you know in advance about a course or an exam, the less you will worry.*
- *Knowing about an exam means understanding what kinds of questions you will be asked, how the exam will be graded, how much time you’ll have to respond, and so on. Knowing that you are prepared in terms of the exam’s content is probably the most calming knowledge of all. Consistent study, frequent review, and diligent practice throughout the course will powerfully support you for daily classroom learning and for taking tests.*