

CHAPTER

11

Practice with Sample AP English Language Exam Essays

IN THIS CHAPTER

Summary: Apply what you've learned thus far to sample AP English Language prompts and essays

KEY IDEA

Key Ideas

- ★ Pull it all together
- ★ Consider the rubrics as guidelines
- ★ Read and assess actual student essays
- ★ Encounter and interact with a synthesis essay prompt

"A deadline is negative inspiration. Still, it's better than no inspiration at all."
—Rita Mae Brown

And nothing can give you writing "inspiration" more quickly than an AP essay prompt in a timed situation. If you've been diligent and persevered throughout your writing training program, you're ready for this experience. You can do it. As your writing trainers we have a few last words of advice for you.

- Read the prompt thoroughly and carefully. Deconstruct it the way you practiced earlier in this book.
- If there is a given text, read and notate it as we did in Chapter 6.
- Organize your notes and write the thesis statement as you have practiced.
- Write the essay with the prompt, purpose, and thesis statement always uppermost in your mind.
- Make certain to include specific examples and/or references related to the thesis.

STRATEGY

- Incorporate your examples and references into the paragraphs.
- Be sure to provide adequate and appropriate attribution.
- Allow yourself a couple of minutes to proofread your essay quickly. Check for syntax, topic adherence, and coherence. If you have to eliminate something, *neatly* draw a line through it. (Better a cross out than a blatant error.) If you have to add something, depending on the length and location, use the carat ^, or parenthesis (), or asterisk *.

Sample AP English Language Essay Prompt 1

In “At the Funeral” from *An Unfinished Burlesque of Books on Etiquette*, Mark Twain addresses the social norms surrounding a very serious subject. In a well-written essay, identify Twain’s purpose and analyze the rhetorical strategies he uses to develop and support this purpose.

“At the Funeral”

Do not criticize the person in whose honor the entertainment is given.

Make no remarks about his equipment. If the handles [of the encasement] are plated, it is best to not observe it.

If the odor of the flowers is too oppressive for your comfort, remember that they were not brought there for you, and that the person for whom they were brought suffers no inconvenience from their presence. 5

Listen, with an intense expression of attention as you can command, to the official statement of the character and history of the person in whose honor the entertainment is given; and if these statistics should seem to fail to tally with the facts in places, do not nudge your neighbor, or press your foot upon his toes, or manifest, by any other sign, your awareness that taffy is being distributed. 10

If the official hopes expressed concerning the person in whose honor the entertainment is given are known to you to be oversized, let it pass – do not interrupt.

At the moving passages, be moved – but only according to the degree of your intimacy with the parties giving the entertainment, or with the party in whose honor the entertainment is given. Where a blood relation sobs, an intimate friend should choke up, a distant acquaintance should sigh, a stranger should merely fumble sympathetically with his handkerchief. Where the occasion is military, the emotions should be graded according to military rank, the highest officer present taking precedence in emotional violence, and the rest modifying their feelings according to their position in the service. 15 20

Do not bring your dog.

Rubrics for Prompt 1

The High-Range Essay:

- Correctly identifies Twain’s purpose and attitude toward his subject
- Effectively discusses/analyzes methods used to create the tone, attitude
- Effectively analyzes devices used to develop the purpose
- Effectively connects the humor to the author’s purpose
- Recognizes and discusses the subtleties of the passage
- Good use of connective tissue

- Effectively manipulates language
- Clear organization and topic adherence
- Few, if any, syntactical errors

The Mid-Range Essay:

- Correctly identifies the author's purpose and attitude
- Adequately recognizes and analyzes the devices used to create tone and attitude
- Adequately analyzes the devices used to develop the purpose
- Recognition of Twain's subtleties may be missing
- Development not as strong/complete as the high range essays
- A few syntactical errors

The Low-Range Essay:

- Inadequate response to the prompt
- May misrepresent or incorrectly identify the author's purpose and attitude toward his subject
- May inaccurately identify and/or analyze rhetorical devices
- Ideas are incompletely developed
- Indicates a lack of control of diction, syntax and/or organization

Sample Student Essays

Student A

Do not pick your nose and lick your fingers while conversing with your dentist. Do not yell out instructions to actors in crowded movie theaters. If you sleep in the nude, always wear a long, heavy bathrobe when collecting your morning paper.

All of these instructions are rather obvious, I hope – but extremely humorous. I never realized Mark Twain had such a great sense of humor. He makes a funeral, that ordinarily is a remarkably somber occasion, almost bearable with his sarcastic tone. I remember thinking that Tom Sawyer's own funeral in Twain's novel of the same name was amusing, but not quite as funny as "At the Funeral."

Because of the diction and syntax in this passage, the excerpt could easily qualify as a "Miss Manners" column from my local newspaper. It could also fit in with stuffy old British books. The very proper and elegant English used helps to make this piece so ironic. One would expect important matters to be discussed when "the official statement of the character and history of the person in whose honor" is read, but in actuality, one would be more likely to crack up with laughter. Who would even think about a mourner bringing a dog to a funeral, or examining the handles of the coffin to see if they are plated?

The things Twain suggests are too ridiculous for anyone to ever consider them as realistic possibilities, but that is exactly what makes this passage hilarious. This twist on such a serious event is positively unexpected, and at first glance, the reader is almost taken aback until he realizes that this is a humorous piece about a funeral. The fact that such a grave subject is touched upon in a jocular fashion is ironic. The whole work is based on irony and sarcasm. Twain provides a series of negative commandments, "do not nudge your neighbor," and "do not bring your dog!" This becomes

more ridiculous as the passage progresses. Also, the tips Twain gives are so absurd that not one single person on the face of this planet would ever do any of the things Twain warns against.

My favorite part of “At the Funeral” is Twain counseling against showing one’s acknowledgement of the truth that is being fudged (or the “taffy being distributed”) when the person is being eulogized. It’s so funny because people are supposed to be respectful at funerals, and this work is all about people being disrespectful.

The piece was enjoyable to read because it was so humorous. I would really like to read more of Mark Twain’s work now that my eyes have been opened to his comedic side.

Student B

When many enter a funeral home, besides often being overcome with grief, many find themselves lost and wondering how to behave. Here, Mark Twain “conveniently forgets” the grief associated with funerals, and gives a humorous account of how one should act.

This passage’s humorous tone, that is really sarcastic, reminds us of the first time each of us has entered a funeral home. I can remember my first time in one, wondering how to act or what to say. Twain’s “guidelines” wouldn’t have been of too much help to me before. But after attending a funeral it is a fresh reminder of what goes on, and of the thoughts that filled my head.

Twain uses short sentences and simple diction from the first line, making this a great essay you would find in a small chapter of a book or in an “upbeat” funeral home. At points the reader may think Twain is attempting to be serious, but by the end of the sentence, Twain uses the unexpected to create irony. Nowhere is this more obvious than when he tells us “Do not bring your dog!” at the end of the passage. Twists are placed in every sentence. Twain uses this every time that he states a thought that no refined person would ever say, such as referring to the “equipment.” Paragraph four ends with an action many of us are guilty of at funeral homes. Many times I have heard untruths at funerals and have seen rude nudging.

Twain creates humor by expressing in words the thoughts people have inside at funeral homes. At every funeral I go to the smell of the flowers is always that same extreme smell. Do I comment to my family? Of course I don’t. Here, Twain not only admits the “oppressive” nature of the flowers, but he acts sarcastically by telling of how the honored person cannot smell them.

Twain possessed a power to place the intangible feelings of many in words of meaning. He, like many, finds funerals confusing. Yet, he expresses the way he finds best to deal with some common feelings.

Rating the Student Essays

Student A

This is a high-range essay for the following reasons:

- Obviously understands the tone and intent of the passage
- Recognizes the devices used to create humor
- Presents a clear, controlled, confident voice
- Effectively addresses the requirements of the prompt
- Catches the subtleties of the passage
- Good connective tissue

- Mature diction and syntax
- Clear organization and topic coherence
- Few, if any, syntactical errors.

This writer attempts to recreate the tone and attitude of Twain's passage to indicate a true understanding of the prompt and selection. This risk indicates a confident student writer.

Student B

This is a mid-range essay for the following reasons:

- Correctly identifies Twain's tone and attitude
- Adequate illustration of the devices used to create and indicate tone and attitude
- Clear and concise analysis of the tone and attitude
- Needs to link observations with the text
- Obvious examples
- Not as subtle as the high-range essays
- Few, if any, lapses in diction and syntax

This solid, mid-range essay is developed by a writer who brings personal experience into the presentation. The essay's brevity and need of further development keep this student's response from being ranked in the higher range.

Sample AP English Language Essay Prompt 2

After carefully reading the following passage from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Hawthorne uses language to explore and represent Hester Prynne's outlook on her own existence and that of women in general. Consider such elements as diction, tone, imagery, and rhetorical strategies and devices.

"Another View of Hester" (chapter XIII)

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. A tendency to speculation, though it may keep women quiet, as it does men, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary trait, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, a woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by an exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish. Thus, Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind: now turned aside by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. There was a wild and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere. At times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide.

The scarlet letter had not done its office.

Rubrics for Prompt 2

A High-Ranking Essay:

- Indicates a complete understanding of the prompt
- Clearly identifies and illustrates Hester's outlook on life
- Presents, describes, and analyzes various rhetorical strategies, devices, elements used by the author to create this outlook
- Effectively cites specific references from the text to illustrate and support points being made
- Is clear, well-organized, and coherent
- Demonstrates a mature writing style
- Contains minor errors/flaws, if any

Sample Student Essays

Student A

*Before Title IX and the equal rights movement, most women were treated as inferior to men. As recent probes into Iraq and other middle Eastern nations have shown, they still are in large areas of the world. Women who have suffered and are suffering are often without a voice. It is hard to put into words the feeling of being inferior, as is the feeling of knowing you are being held down by invisible chains. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, describes these feelings through the voice of Hester Prynne, the protagonist. In the passage, Hawthorne's diction, tone, and syntax help portray the plight of Prynne as a woman in hostile circumstances.*

Hawthorne's diction is what sets the tone for the passage, and on a larger scale, the novel. In the first sentence he refers to the "dark question" that Prynne asked herself regarding her role as a woman. By injecting the word "dark," he immediately starts the negative trend. There is no attempt whatsoever to soften the blow of her dilemma, as there shouldn't be. When contemplating whether life is worth existing, Prynne concludes that it is a "hopeless task." There is a theme of desperation indicated by Hawthorne's adjectives. Choosing the words that he does, Hawthorne makes it clear that the treatment of women is an atrocity worthy of scorn.

The diction of a rhetorical question lends an undeniable sense of doom to the passage. The question Hester is pondering is, "Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?" There is an undeniable mood of negativity behind this question. She's basically asking if even the happiest woman's life isn't just a complete waste of time. Finally, after much internal debate, Hester decides that life would only be worth living if the stars happened to "align" and a few conditions came true. "As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew," she utters without much hope. Even if that occurred, the nature of women would have to be altered. These conditions reinforce the feeling of desperation.

Besides the words he chooses, the images Hawthorne creates portrays Hester as she experiences an epiphany regarding the "insurmountable precipice" facing women. The stark contrast of Prynne before and after this realization is depicted with, "Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb." By stating in obvious terms the "throb" that her heart had before, the author

makes clear that even the strongest of women were broken by the era. Mental unrest is often hard to explain, but Hawthorne accurately describes Prynne's mental turbulence as a "dark labyrinth of mind." She is thinking of so many things that it feels like she is lost in a maze of doubt. Perhaps the tone can best be described in what Prynne sees as she looks around, the "wild and ghastly scenery all around her."

It is difficult to write about the persecution of a race, or gender, or religion. Sometimes it is just too painful to put into words the degradation of an entire group of people. But, Hawthorne does just that in this specific passage from *The Scarlet Letter*. When describing the life of Hester Prynne, a headstrong woman languishing in the wrong time period, Hawthorne's words are harsh. The questions are biting. And, the message is clear. Inequality is unjust, and sugar coating it is an injustice to the many women, like Prynne, without a voice of their own.

Student B

Individuals may devote their entire lives trying to fill a glass that they see as always half empty. For those who are inhibited by a restrictive society, the effort seems hopeless. Seeing that individual beliefs can be a reflection of social values, Nathaniel Hawthorne criticizes the hypocrisies of Puritan morality in *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel reveals distinct barriers and unbending rules that generate feelings of pessimism and desperation, specifically for the young Hester Prynne as seen in this excerpt from Chapter XIII. Hawthorne's diction, tone, and rhetorical strategies expose his readers to Hester's negative state of mind.

Hawthorne's diction sets the negative and gloomy tone of this selection with such phrases as "dark question" and "hopeless task" used to define Hester as a woman whose role in Puritan society is both bleak and unbendingly defined. But, she questions the meaning of life and finds that her capabilities exceed the opportunities society offers women. The author uses rhetorical questions to involve the reader in Hester's situation. "Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?" Whether asked by Hawthorne's Hester or Shakespeare's Hamlet ("To be or not to be . . ."), such a "dark" question yields a doomsday evaluation of life. Describing Hester as ". . . without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind . . . a home and comfort nowhere . . .," Hawthorne employs pathos in his imagery to further expose the injustices in society and to advocate change.

It is ironic that Hester's environment deemed it correct for a woman to "keep quiet," with the repression only furthering her desire to be heard. No doubt with this in mind, Hawthorne, uses conditional sentences to emphasize the uncertainties that a woman has as to whether or not she can ". . . assume what seems a fair and suitable position." Hester questions the very "ethereal essence" of her life—"existence worth accepting."

Fairness was not a consideration for women in Puritan society. Hester is trapped by rigid boundaries that forbid her to own property or maintain an independent life. Her extreme sorrow forces her to doubt the effectiveness of her endeavors to redraw society's boundaries. Hester illustrates the idea that it is only through continued struggle that individuals may, at some point, come to see the glass as half full and being filled as they live.

Rating the Student Essays

Student A

This writer creates a strong opening and even stronger closing paragraph. And, in between, the body paragraphs present the clear thoughts of a mature writer. This essay

- Correctly identifies Hester's outlook on life;
- Cites appropriate and strong textual references;
- Thoroughly integrates citations into the sentences and paragraphs;
- Contains a couple of long, awkwardly worded sentences;
- Uses connective tissue very well;
- Demonstrates good organization.

Student B

This student writer demonstrates quite a mature voice and writing style. Smoothly integrating citations into sentences and paragraphs throughout, this high-ranking essay has a very strong second paragraph with its reference to Shakespeare. This writer also

- Demonstrates a clear understanding of the given text and the prompt;
- Presents numerous appropriate examples of the various rhetorical devices used in the text;
- Makes effective use of transitions and echo words;
- Has few, if any, syntactical errors.

Sample AP English Language Essay Prompt 3

The following remark was made by Senator Robert Byrd during a heated debate on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 2002 regarding granting the President of the United States special powers to wage war. Drawing on your own knowledge and experience, write a carefully reasoned essay in which you defend, challenge, or qualify Senator Byrd's viewpoint.

"Titus Livius, one of the greatest of Roman historians, said all things will be clear and distinct to the man who does not hurry. Haste is blind and improvident. Blind and improvident, Mr. President, blind and improvident."

Rubrics for Prompt 3

A High-Ranking Essay

- Clearly indicates an understanding of Livius's statement and the demands of the prompt
- Clearly takes a position regarding Byrd's reference to the Livius quotation
- Thoroughly develops a balanced argument with specific examples and historical or personal references
- Smoothly integrates examples and references into the body of each paragraph
- Adheres to the topic with transitions and other connective tissue
- Demonstrates a mature voice, diction, and syntax
- Contains few, if any, syntactical errors

Sample Student Essays

Student A

Congress recently has had to deal with one of the most difficult decisions that a country can make—war. A distinct line was drawn between hawks and doves, while many smaller divisions were created about patriotism and the midterm elections. One senator who rose above the quagmire to state definitive beliefs was Robert Byrd. He ultimately wanted more time, more information, and more debates to deal with the issue of war. In one speech he quoted Titus Livius, specifically his remarks on haste. “All things will be clear and distinct to the man who does not hurry. Haste is blind and improvident . . . blind and improvident . . . blind and improvident.” This was Byrd’s obvious cry for restraint; to let time provide answers to difficult questions.

Byrd did not have to look far to find support for his belief. He could have found it in Roman history, but there are many other pieces of our culture that can support this position. “Haste makes waste” is one of the most well-known and often used expressions. Similarly, the story of the tortoise and the hare is ingrained in everyone’s mind as they are growing up. Those who rush end up losing, while slow and steady wins the race. Although just a fable, it has a valuable moral. Also, simple logic would dictate that since decisions are based on knowledge, and time can allow for the acquisition of more knowledge, decisions are best made with enough time given over to thorough consideration of the issue.

The maxim that haste will harm one’s decision is also illustrated in many works of literature. In William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Prince Hamlet is faced with a very difficult decision. He sees the ghost of his dead father who instructs him to kill his uncle in vengeance for his usurpation of the throne. Hamlet could have rashly, and without thought, gone and murdered his uncle Claudius, but instead he waited. He observed and inquired; eventually, he found that his uncle did, in fact, kill his father and claim the throne. However, since he waited, he became 100% sure of his actions. Acting with haste would have resulted in endless questions. He would have wondered if he had done the right thing, or was the specter just a dream. Hamlet allowed time to clarify this situation; thus, he sees his actions as justified.

Byrd could have also looked in a history textbook. Previous military mistakes were made with decisions made without a great deal of time for deliberation. Napoleon attacking his uncooperative ally Russia ultimately led to his defeat. If instead of attacking, he had waited to see if Russia would correct its anti-French actions, perhaps all of history would be rewritten. Similarly, The World War I may have been avoided if only the rush to avenge an assassination were delayed. If Russia were not so quick to declare war on Austria, and Germany not so quick to declare war on Russia, and France and England not so fast to declare war on Germany . . . , perhaps the needless slaughter known as The Great War would have been nothing but an attempted Serbian revolution. Millions of deaths throughout history would have been prevented, if only deliberation supplanted haste.

This is the exact statement that the senator was trying to make. By using and repeating a message from the past, Robert Byrd was emphasizing that mistakes have been made in haste before: let’s not repeat them. In some circumstances, sloth might not be the deadly sin as it is so often defined.

Student B

Sun Tzu argues in his book The Art of War, “victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors rush to war first and then seek to win.” Tzu’s observation illustrates a piece of common knowledge easily overlooked in a time of war. On the floor of the U.S. Senate, subsequent to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the matter of granting the president special powers to wage war was under heated debate. Senator Robert Byrd, a democrat from West Virginia, quoted Titus Livius, emphasizing that haste in a matter as delicate as this is “blind and improvident.” One doesn’t need to be fluent in Tzu’s school of thought to know that “jumping the gun” (or in this case, jumping to the gun) isn’t the most advantageous path to follow; American history frequently illustrates this.

President Polk’s administration was chiefly, if not completely, focused on the expansion of the United States into the Texas and California territories. Intransigent and bent on war, Polk disregarded simple diplomacy with the Mexican government and positioned his troops along the Rio Grande. Inevitably, conflict erupted and the Mexican War commenced. The bulk of the American people blindly supported the war, while a few such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and John C. Calhoun, openly denounced our haste to wage war. These calls for the ending of armed conquest went unanswered. President Polk’s lack of careful deliberation cost the lives of more than 10,000 people, ended favorable relations with Mexico, and ultimately brought the nation closer to civil war.

In his autobiography, Ben Franklin equates the game of chess with the need of foresight in international diplomacy. He argues that in chess, much like in life, you must evaluate your current position: What advantages do I have by moving here?; How can my enemy use my move against me?, etc. You must always think three steps ahead and not rush blindly into any situation. Most importantly, you have to be aware of and be willing to deal with the consequences of your actions.

Whether he’s cognizant of it or not, our current president is playing a chess game, with global politics. He has moved his pawns around Iraq; he has moved his rooks and bishops into command positions ready to lead the attack; he has moved the U.S. queen from her safety within America to the controversial and paranoid Middle East. Constantly probing Iraq for weakness, the president doesn’t realize how poorly he’s protecting the one piece that must be guarded at all cost—his king, which is nothing less than the best interests of the United States. Senator Byrd indicated he realized this with his remarks made on the floor of the U.S. Senate.

Swiftiness is folly. Perhaps the need to end terrorism, or the need for oil is guiding the commander-in-chief’s penchant for rash action. Whatever the reasons, the United States must carefully consider what we will gain and protect if we hurry into war.

Rating the Student Essays

Student A

Although this student’s reference to Shakespeare is weak, the other examples presented in support of his position are strong and clearly connected to the thesis. This writer also

- Indicates a clear understanding of the quotation and the demands of the prompt;
- Successfully implies his agreement with Senator Byrd;
- Smoothly integrates examples into the sentences and paragraphs of the essay;
- Makes good use of parallel structure in paragraph 4;
-

- Uses good connective tissue;
- Constructs several awkwardly worded sentences;
- Demonstrates a mature voice and writing style;
- Constructs an interesting closing paragraph.

Student B

This is a strong and mature writer, and this is demonstrated especially with the strong opening and closing paragraphs, together with interesting historical references. This student also

- Indicates his understanding of the quotation and the demands of the prompt;
- Definitely takes a position and states it clearly;
- Constructs a very good chess analogy in the penultimate paragraph;
- Effectively employs transitions and echo words;
- Has few, if any, syntactical errors.

Sample Synthesis Essay Prompt

You may encounter a different type of essay prompt on the AP English Language Exam—the synthesis essay prompt (see Chapter 4). Below is an example of what this type of prompt might look like. On the actual exam, the prompt will include the text from the sources you will need to use; here, however, we have just listed examples of sources (without the accompanying text).

(Suggested reading time—15 minutes)

(Suggested writing time—40 minutes)

Cheerleading is an integral part of interscholastic sports. We have all watched the acrobatics of cheerleaders exhorting us to support the team's efforts. There are those who maintain that cheerleading should be classified as a legitimate sport. However, in a recent court decision, a federal judge has ruled that cheerleading can no longer be a recognized sport when considering allotment of funding, scholarships, and equality of opportunity.

Carefully read the following texts, including introductory information. Using at least three of the sources, synthesize the information and include it into a well-developed essay that takes a position on whether or not cheerleading should be considered a legitimate sport by our high schools and colleges. Make certain that your argument is the central thrust of your essay and that you incorporate your sources in illustrating and supporting your claim. Avoid summarizing your sources, and clearly cite them. You may cite your sources as Source A, Source B, etc., or use the descriptions in parentheses.

Source A (Underhill Court Decision)

Source B (Goodman news report)

Source C (Reilly)

Source D (Parker Cartoon)

Source E (Chart)

Source F (AACCA Report)

Source G (Majors newspaper article)