

Success on the AP Exam or 'What AP Readers Long to See'

A compilation of thoughts from readers of both exams

1. AP= "Answer the Prompt" Read the prompt. It hurts to give a low score to someone who misread the prompt but wrote a good essay. While readers try to reward students for what they do well, the students must answer the prompt. "In the countless essays I've scored, I'm always amazed at how many students fail to answer the question."
2. Do everything the prompt suggests; in other words, answer all parts of the prompt. Always answer EXACTLY what the question asks.
3. Think before you write. Rarely, is your first thought, your best thought. If you are working on the "open house" think about which novel or play is the best for the prompt? Don't limit yourself to supplied suggestions. Many of the best responses deal with selections that are not on the list. If you are working on the argument question think about your best support.
4. Plan and organize your response. At least 10 min per essay can be used for planning. Brainstorm and write down any ideas. Even make a quick outline if time permits. You needn't outline extensively, but a little organization will help you avoid extensive editing, such as crossing out lines or, in some cases, whole paragraphs. It is best to know before you begin what the finished product will look like. Don't let organization "just happen," plan for it to happen. It's no fun for the reader to pick over the remains and try to decipher sentences crammed into the margins.
5. Make strong first impressions. Build your opening response artistically. Do not parrot the prompt. The introduction is most important as it sets the reader's expectations. Get your THESIS quickly. Another question Leader writes "Use the language of the prompt (questions) not the prompt itself. The student writer's inclination to repeat the question verbatim is disadvantageous. Practically, the repetition is a waste of the writer's time; moreover the practice of the student writer's substitute the question for a first paragraph suggests a lack of sophistication and control as well as the inability to develop a viable thesis." Remember that the question itself is NOT a thesis though its required tasks should be the skeleton of the student essay.
6. Begin your response immediately. Don't beat around the bush with generalizations like "There are many great novels..." or "Since the beginning of time..."—Lose these timeworn platitudes! Here's an example of a creative opening that immediately sets up a central idea/thesis:

An illuminated photograph of a father who "fell in love with long distance" sits on the mantle of the Wingfield's apartment in Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie."

7. Use clear transition helping the reader follow the progression of your essay. Keep your paragraphs organized; don't digress.
8. Many prompt end with the statement, "Avoid Plot Summary," or a similar thought. BELIEVE IT! (You should have a brief précis at the beginning of the body of the open question.) Your essay can follow selected plot sequences in the order in which they appear in the work but your central idea/thesis-- not the plot—should dictate your overall organization. You are proving an assertion, not telling a story.

9. Write to express, not impress. Keep vocabulary and syntax within your zone of competence. Students who inflate their writing, using a large vocabulary word incorrectly, often inadvertently entertain, but seldom explain. There is, however, no substitute for command of a good vocabulary. A Question Leader writes, “Avoid the terms *positive* and *negative*; these words are so overused in AP essays that they almost inevitably suggest that the writer’s vocabulary is imprecise.” This is especially true on the Language exam when asked to articulate tone and attitude.
10. Demonstrate that you understand style by showing the reader how the author has messaged the selection to create a desired effect. This indicates that you are aware of the creative process. Explain HOW not WHAT. Do not simply identify a simile for instance, explain the PURPOSE of the use of the simile. A Question Leader suggests: “Avoid such comments as, ‘The writer uses diction/syntax/imagery...’ without providing a qualifier for these terms. For example, Format diction, sophisticated diction, awkward diction, inverted syntax, balanced syntax, convoluted syntax.” Not only is the AP reader impressed with the precision of the student writer’s analytical language, the precision of language is often a means of the writer’s gaining precision and control of his/her own analysis.
11. Maintain a sense of simplicity. The best student writers see much, but they say it very successfully. Do not mistake simplicity for “shortness”. Be sure you develop your essay fully. Readers will give low scores to “thin” papers. When in doubt, find something to illustrate. Begin a few sentences with “For example...” A question leader suggests, “Avoid paraphrasing any passage from the examination itself. This is a time-consuming exercise that does not satisfy the demands of the question. While an occasional quoted item from the examination text may be important to the meaning of the student essay, it is important to avoid threading an essay together with quotations from the test. Remember that the AP Readers will have essentially memorized the question and the passage with which they are working, and the essay which is primarily the language of the passage—however artfully threaded—is quite evidently not the student’s analysis.”
12. By the same token, there is an important “critical mass” necessary for the response. Approx. 1 and ½ pages would be appropriate for most responses. Anything less is a potential “red flag” that the student lacks organization and may be too verbose.
13. Let your writing dance with ideas and insights. You can get a 6 or a 7 with a lock-step approach, but the essays that earn 8’s or 9’s expand to a wider perspective.
14. Write legibly. If a reader can’t read half the words, you won’t get a fair reading—even if your essay is passed to another reader with keener eyesight. It can not be advantageous for the writer to have three teachers leaning over an essay trying to decipher the test. It is simply a matter of priority. If students know it is important, most can immediately improve the handwriting.
15. Let your work stand on its own merits. Avoid penning “pity me” notes (“I was up all night,” “I have a cold,” etc.) to the reader.
16. Refrain from colloquial speech and immature, excessively informal vocabulary and tone. NEVER refer to the author by his or her first name. (You are not best friends with Wendell Berry, so stop with the casual tone of acquaintance.) Typically, use the author’s full name in the first reference then use only last names in the later references. Remember, stylistic maturity is an expectation throughout the essay.
17. Not all examples of support are the same. Lack of discernment with regard to quality of examples and evidence reflects a lack of mature thinking and writing. Unless necessary or perfectly suited try and refrain from Disney movies or pulp fiction, especially on the open question of the Lit. exam and the

argument question of the Lang. exam. Again, the student wants to work within their own comfort zone, but thinking “out of the box” can often yield surprising results.

18. Writing a “9” essay is a quantifiable and measurable act. Although a “9” need not be perfect, some suggests that typically represent a upper third score: sophisticated vocabulary, clear transitions, apt quotes and examples, stylistic integration of quotes, sophisticated punctuation, stylish use of parallel structure, active voice.

19. Other stylistic issues that always seems to crop-up year after year:

-Literature is written about in present tense

-Avoid the disease of “adverbitis”: obviously, surely, & certainly are really, very bad ones

-Use of clichéd language is a clear sign of an immature writer

-Use of second person “you” often sound inflated and preachy, especially in an argument question

-Use of absolutes and qualifies also reflects immature thinking and writing: never, always, everyone, sort of, perhaps, and kind of

-Use of rhetorical questions, especially at the beginning should be used judiciously. Remember you are trying to answer a question, not propose more of them

-Enough with the exclamation marks

Credit goes to: Sally Pfeiffer, Mike Auer, Eddie DuPriest, Bob Litchfield, Nancy Potter, Jeff Norton, Chris Baldwin, Valerie Stevenson