

# AP Language and Composition

## Core Binaries Argument Essay Strategy

### Overview

The third free-response question on the AP English Language and Composition exam is one in which you are asked to take a position on an open, contestable question, and to support that position with arguments whose evidence is to come from “your readings, experience, or observation” (in the words of the 2016 AP exam), rather than from sources provided to you. For a lot of students, the task of both organizing and coming up with evidence-based arguments on an issue for which they do not have textual sources is uniquely challenging.

But there are ways to approach this situation to produce a well-evaluated essay, despite its inherent difficulty. There are elements of academic argumentation that apply to the rhetorical situation you are in when responding to this question that are, you might say, universal, and that can position you to succeed with your essay, despite being on unfamiliar content-ground. There are structures of argument, and argumentative moves, that can be deployed to help you achieve an “effective” score (7 or 8), and possibly even the highest score (9).

### Strategy

There is a three-step pre-writing strategy that we recommend you conduct in response to Question 3 in the free-response section of the AP Language and Composition exam. You should execute this strategy flexibly; with questions that you have quick and substantial ideas on how you will respond, it would make sense to apply this strategy more loosely, using it to help structure your argument, for instance, more than identifying oppositions. That said, this is a sturdy, reliable strategy, which can serve to organize your thinking and help you produce an AP-approved argument essay in a very short time on a topic in which you are not well versed.

#### Step One: Identify Oppositions

Rooted in every prompt or question or controversial issue to which you are expected to make arguments are **oppositions**, opposing terms, conflicting ideas. Sometimes these are multi-faceted, but often they can be expressed as a set of binaries. From these binaries, a straightforward or more nuanced position can be constructed. So, to get a handle on the question, to begin to think about how you can take a position supported by arguments, and to itemize evidence, you should first identify the core oppositions embedded in the prompt.

Most of the AP prompts provide terms and ideas that *suggest* core binaries, but don’t fully establish them. In this sense they are fragments that need to be completed or augmented through your own thoughtful analysis. So, for example, the 2013 prompt establishes a clear binary between Plato’s view that ownership hurts a person’s moral character and Aristotle’s view that ownership develops moral character. This is a core binary that can be viewed as a fragment, since it is up to the exam-taker to think through what binaries are contained within ownership’s impact on moral character. Further, the prompt adds the views of a third philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, who conceives of ownership as intellectual mastery. This is also a fragment, since Sartre’s understanding of ownership as cognitive is only implicitly contrasted with ownership as material possession.

Identifying several core binaries explicitly or implicitly embedded in the prompt will enable you to see what your argumentative options are and to efficiently and even spontaneously generate ideas for evidence that will support certain options more than others.

## Step Two: Manufacture Examples

As part of the Core Binaries Strategy we are providing you with a simple graphic organizer in which you can identify three to five core binaries in the question. From there, under these core binaries headings, you should list the examples you can manufacture. You are not able to bring this graphic organizer into the actual AP exam, but it is a simple T-chart in design, and practicing it a few times will enable you to set up the graphic organizer very quickly on a single sheet of paper in your answer booklet.

A key challenge in this question type is that you are not given sources from which to derive evidence to support your arguments. The implication of setting up the core binaries is that they will supply the ideas that you can formulate into claims (i.e., arguments that will get fleshed out and evidenced in body paragraphs). But the evidence itself you will need to manufacture. This means that you will need to quickly list out one or two examples from your prior or personal knowledge that support at least one side of the binary, for three to five binaries.

When working to develop and support arguments with evidence that is not textual, culled from sources, or researched, the category of evidence in use is “examples.” Other categories of evidence include authoritative quotation, data, facts, paraphrased information, and textual reference; these are generally inapplicable to AP exam free-response question 3, since they are almost always harvested and assembled from sources (excepting data that you may have memorized). Examples can be more broadly described as instances supporting a binary that the reader will likely recognize to be true and that the reader will accept. So, for instance, in response to the 2017 AP exam question, two of the three student writing samples used the example of Donald Trump’s skill with artifice – his public relations ability -- as a key factor in his getting elected.

Here are several criteria that can help you determine whether the examples you are manufacturing to support your core binary oppositions are effective.

- **The example is highly aligned with the binary**  
There should be little to no daylight between your core binary and your example. It is more important that the example be clearly supportive and highly aligned than that it be nuanced.
- **You feel comfortable in your knowledge of the example**  
This question allows for you to go rather far afield to find your supporting examples. That is by design within the test itself. It is a little counter-intuitive, because the features of the exam in general are so highly academic. Here, though, you should be thinking more broadly than academic fields. If you are comfortable in your knowledge of something that is an aligned example of a binary, you should use it.
- **Include at least one academic example**  
The obverse of the previous criterion is that you do not want *all* of your examples to come from outside academic (school-related) fields or subject areas. You should include at least one example that could fit within the curriculum of a high school or college. Doing so will lend credibility to your other examples, and will take the reader’s mind off of concern for your knowledge base.
- **Your description of the example will seem reasonable to the reader**  
You have not researched your example in any way, so it doesn’t have to be highly authoritative or commanding. It just has to seem reasonable, like a possibly viable, accurate description of the thing.

## Step Three: Structure Arguments

Now the graphic organizer you are using (or that you very quickly created on a sheet of paper) should have three to five core binaries on it, and manufactured examples in as few as three, and as many as six, fields under each half of the core binaries. Of course, if you have five core binaries identified, it is possible to have manufactured examples in as many as ten fields, but it would most likely consume too much of your allotted 40 minutes to prep this thoroughly. Once you have several solid manufactured examples, in light of the above criteria, you should move on to structuring your arguments.

In structuring arguments, you want to look for a pattern or connection between your strongest examples, those that you will be able to write about most fluently, with as much authority as you can, given very limited time. You should circle these preferred



and patterned examples and the half-binaries that they support. You need to be able to find a through-line, pattern, or common connection between the fields you have circled. If an additional half-binary (or two) is what is preventing you from doing so, you should eliminate the impeding field and example, as long as you are still left with at least two, but preferably three to four. The way you make the half-binaries with examples fit together is, of course, your overall argument (what Argument-Centered Education and the College Board call your position or thesis). You should be able to say to yourself – mentally or in a whisper, you probably won't have time to write it out separately – the formulation of your overall position. The half-binaries with examples themselves become your argument (body) paragraphs.

A few important considerations for this stage of structuring your arguments.

→ **Be sure to check your overall position against the last paragraph of the prompt**

The last paragraph of the question 3 prompt contains the specific direction for your argument essay. You have to be sure that your overall position follows the directions provided in full. Often you will be asked to take a position on a controversial, though intellectual or conceptual, issue. For example, the 2017 exam asks you to take a position on Christopher Hedges' view that the most essential skill in politics is artifice. But sometimes there will be a little bit of a wrinkle. So, the 2014 exam asks you to define creativity (in the context of discussions of its decline in students) and then take a position on whether schools should create a course in creativity. Your overall position in this essay has to begin with (in an introduction) or incorporate (consistently throughout the argument paragraphs) the way you are defining creativity.

→ **Consistency on one side or the other of the core binaries is the safest approach**

This is a very time-pressured exam, certainly, and you are not being asked to say something original on the topic. So sticking to one side or the other of the core binaries is in many cases an advisable strategy. The 2016 exam, for example, asks you to take a position on Oscar Wilde's maxim that history shows disobedience to be the source of progress. Core binaries can likely lead to your choosing a coherent position for or against Wilde's view, with two to three distinct aspects or variations on the idea developed with a separate example for each. The structure of the essay will be sturdy, and you will be able to ascend the rating scale on the basis of the development of your examples to fill out each argument paragraph.

→ **Include either a nuance in your argument or refutation of a counter-argument**

The College Board describes essays that receive either an 8 or 9 as "sophisticated," "convincing," and "thorough." In practice, this can mean that the highest-rated essays include an argument that nuances or qualifies a consistent position. Or it can mean that the essay engages with a strong counter-argument to its position, and responds to that counter-argument either by refuting it or allowing for a strategic concession to it. (A strategic concession is one that acknowledges the truth and force of the counter-argument up to a point, but maintains that the writer's overall position is nevertheless still valid.) An examination of the rated sample responses bears this out. The top-rated essays consistently employ a single complicating, unexpected move, in addition to thoughtfully deploying examples to support their arguments.

→ **One way of adding nuance is to argue both sides of a core binary**

The core binaries are intended to clarify opposing arguments and argumentative positions. But one means of incorporating nuance, making a surprise move, is to argue that both sides of a binary could be true. We can look to the 2017 exam to produce an example. "Sincerity" can be opposed in a binary with "strategy," and "competence" with "reputation." A writer might argue with examples that Hedges is right that politics and consumer culture are dominated by artifice over substance, but that Obama's election and even re-election demonstrate that occasionally there is a pendulum swing back to popular support for "sincerity" and "competence." However – this paragraph might include – Obama's failure to achieve much of his agenda prove that there is a limit to this counter-swing, and that even when the public wants to support substance, they ultimately require artifice to believe that the substance is real.