

THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION COURSE

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The Advanced Placement (AP) program has been in existence for over twenty-five years and covers twelve fields of study. According to information provided by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), over 23% of all high schools in the United States offer AP courses, and 1,700 colleges award credit to students who have scored well on AP exams. The amount of credit awarded for an AP course varies with the granting institution. English is by far the largest subject area in the AP program. For example, in May 1982, 141,626 students from 5,525 high schools took AP exams, and about one-third of these students took an English test.

There are two exams and courses of study in the AP English area. The more established (often called the "old course") is the AP Literature and Composition course. This program helps students acquire the ability to read closely, understand the conventions of literary discourse, develop an appreciation of literature, and write about literary works cogently and articulately. Students are exposed to representative literary works from several genres and time periods. The Language and Composition program, on the other hand, (often called the "new course") helps students learn the general critical, analytical, and writing skills which help them become competent, college-level writers. Students are exposed to the modes of discourse and the techniques of good writing, and their reading is usually restricted to discursive prose, often about subjects from many different academic disciplines. Although students learn composition

skills in both AP English courses, the “old course” is primarily a college-level introduction to literature, while the “new course” is a college-level composition course.

The object of the Language and Composition course is to help students, while still in high school, to develop the capability of composing college-level prose. Students who demonstrate their abilities by scoring well on the AP exam may receive official credit for one or two freshman composition courses in college. The AP exam consists of fifty-eight objective questions (constituting 40% of the exam) and three essay topics (constituting the remaining 60% of the exam). The students are allotted 60 minutes for completing the objective questions and 90 minutes for writing the essays.

When establishing an AP Language and Composition course in your school, it is perhaps best to identify the “most able and ambitious” students in the graduating class. Weaker students will find the typical AP class much too demanding to compete in successfully. Many AP administrators suggest that a school should make acceptance into the AP class an “honor.” To do this, you might consider establishing a formal application procedure, in which students must write a letter or essay describing why they wish to enroll in the course. This document (especially if it is written in a controlled setting) can then be used as a diagnostic instrument for assessing which students show the most potential for competing successfully in the course. It is advisable, also, to meet with the parents of all AP applicants to stress that admittance into the AP course is an honor but that failure to be admitted does not signify that their children are inferior or not suited for college work. In other words, parents too must understand that students *compete* for a place in the AP class and are not automatically admitted. Finally, if you conduct the application and screening procedure toward the end of an academic year, you will be able to assign summer reading to students accepted into the class; this will help prepare them for the rigorous study ahead. Perhaps you could assign readings in a rhetoric textbook (not a grammar) and an anthology of discursive prose essays.

Ideally, the maximum enrollment in a Language and Composition class should be fifteen students, but certainly no more than twenty-five. Undoubtedly, such a low enrollment is likely to distress many school administrators during a time of fiscal belt tightening, but they should be made

aware that the Language and Composition course is “special.” If the course is handled properly, students will be generating *many* writing assignments throughout the year, and it is extremely difficult to provide students with the careful responses to their writing that they need and deserve if there are more than twenty-five pupils in the class. Every effort should be made to convince administrators that if the Language and Composition course is to be truly “advanced” and contain the necessary *quality* of instruction, the enrollment must be kept low.

The content on the Language and Composition course typically covers eight areas of study:

- levels of diction from formal to casual
- organized study of sentence structure
- varieties of sentence types
- relationships of sentences within paragraphs
- modes of discourse (narration, description, etc.)
- aims of discourse (informational, persuasive, expressive)
- rhetorical strategies (logical, emotional and ethical appeals)
- relationships among author-subject-reader

Enveloping these concerns, however, should be a continual attention to and preoccupation with the *writing process*. Students must learn to view the act of writing as an on-going process involving several activities, including prewriting, arrangement, writing, revision, and proofreading. If students are truly to become college-level writers, they must develop the ability to apply their compositional skills to any rhetorical situation, not just to the AP exam; and to do this they need to have mastered the *process* of writing.

Substantial class time, therefore, should be devoted to discussions of and practice in prewriting techniques. That is, students must know how to use brainstorming, freewriting, the journalistic questions (who, what, when, where, and why), and even heuristics to generate information before they begin to write a paper. Prewriting must become a natural procedure for students whenever they must write a document. Group prewriting activities are especially helpful in familiarizing students with the techniques of generating information and in stressing their importance to the writing process.

AP teachers should also spend time in showing students how to *arrange* and *organize* their information before writing. The old-fashioned "outline" with its Roman and Arabic numerals has come under fire recently, and perhaps with good cause, for being too rigid and artificial. However, with or without an outline, students must recognize the necessity of imposing some type of order on their prewriting material *before writing* a draft. Many composition instructors find that an effective method of teaching arrangement is to encourage students to rewrite their prewriting information as an ordered list of items that their paper will contain. Students often perceive this procedure to be much more practical and effective than the traditional outline.

It is perhaps best to teach AP students to invest more time into *prewriting* and *revision* activities than into *writing* the first draft. Generally, many beginning writers view the writing stage as an overwhelming activity, often because they are trying to carry out too many operations at once. Perhaps it is best to encourage students to write a draft as fast as possible after they have adequately prewritten and arranged their material. There is no need for writers to get stuck on matters of correctness or proper phrasing at this stage. When writing a draft, students should not, for example, spend ten minutes trying to think of the correct word in a particular sentence or the best phraseology in another. Encourage them, instead, to write the draft quickly, leaving fill-in-the-blanks when they are stumped. The objective in the writing stage is to compose a draft that then can be reworded and reshaped in the revision process. This procedure eliminates the strain from writers to perform everything in one sitting. It is also helpful in preparing students for the essay exam component of the AP test, since it helps them learn to write rapidly while avoiding "writers' block."

It is essential to stress to AP students the importance of the revision process. Once a writer has produced a draft quickly after prewriting and arranging, he or she should be prepared to reshape the paper. Too often, students believe that the first draft is the final one. Encourage students to rewrite a draft several times, critically analyzing the paper sentence by sentence. The best writers are frequently the most proficient editors, so it is advisable to spend a considerable amount of class time on revision techniques. Many AP teachers conduct revision workshops in their classes before each paper is due; in these sessions, students exchange

papers and make editorial comments on them. This practice helps students acquire a "critical eye."

Finally, students should be aware that *proofreading* is distinct from revision. While in the revision process students frequently are engaged in wholesale rewriting and reconceptualization of their draft; in the proofreading stage they are concerned with matters of correctness: grammar, spelling, neatness, etc. Too often, student writers are overly concerned with these matters *while they are writing*, thus stifling creativity and originality.

If instruction in the writing process is thoroughly integrated into the Language and Composition curriculum, students are likely to learn the techniques that not only will ensure their success on the AP exam, but, most importantly, will also enable them to compete well in the college or university setting. Certainly, this overview of integrating instruction in the writing process into the Language and Composition course is only a brief sketch. AP teachers should draw upon their own knowledge and essays published in *English Journal* and other scholarly composition journals for more detailed pedagogical techniques. However, one source that is immensely valuable to the AP teacher is Erika Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Although this book is directed mainly toward instructors of college-level composition, it contains a wealth of theoretical and pedagogical information which will help AP teachers conduct a successful Language and Composition course.

Throughout the school year, AP students should participate in a variety of writing assignments. Students should have practice in writing different types of papers (personal, persuasive, and perhaps even research papers) and should write in-class as well as out-of-class essays. The in-class assignments could mirror the AP exam experience. In fact, ETS will provide qualified AP teachers with sample exam topics used in past years. For example, here is an essay question used on the 1980 Language and Composition exam. Students were allotted 35 minutes to write the answer.

Public officials or individual citizens have frequently attacked or suppressed works that they consider harmful or offensive. Select a book, movie, play, or television program that some group could object to on the basis of its action, language or theme.

In a well-organized essay, discuss possible grounds for such an attack and then defend the work, arguing, on the basis of its artistic merit or its value to the community, that it should not be suppressed.

Avoid plot summary.

Using ETS exam topics will help prepare students for the exact type of writing they will undertake when they take the AP exam.

Another type of writing assignment that AP teachers have used is the *daily journal*. Students are asked to write a certain amount (usually a full or half page) in a notebook every day. They can choose their own subject so long as each journal entry is a focused discussion of one subject. The instructor grades the journal only on quantity (keeping up with the correct number of pages), not on correctness or any of the usual concerns teachers traditionally have when grading formal papers. This procedure offers students the necessary practice in writing (without concern for a grade) that is so essential for developing writers. At the year's end, the journal grade can be factored into the students' cumulative grade as equal to one or two paper grades.

Since students in the AP class will be writing a substantial amount of prose throughout the year, AP teachers carry an especially heavy burden in providing qualitative responses to all assignments. One method of reducing your response time while increasing the quality of your responses is to use a tape recorder to respond to student writing. In this procedure, students are asked (or given the option) to provide a cassette tape which is submitted with each writing assignment. You then would record your responses on tape rather than spending valuable time writing your remarks on the students' papers. (Note: most students have access to tape players; if they don't own one, a friend is likely to.)

Responding by tape has several advantages:

- it saves time
- it allows for a more detailed, qualitative response
- it allows for communicating in a friendly, constructive tone
- it is very convenient
- students seem to enjoy it

You may find this method awkward the first few times you use it, since it takes practice to coordinate the many

tapes and papers; but soon you will find that it is a useful, effective procedure. For detailed information about this technique, consult an essay entitled "Beyond Evaluation: The Recorded Response to Essays" in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* (Vol. 8, No. 2, 1982).

It is perhaps more difficult to prepare students for the objective component of the AP exam than for the written portion. Generally, students must choose the correct answer from a field of five possibilities in each objective question. The exam questions are usually of two types. In the first type, students are given a sentence and are asked to alter its structure in a specific way. Here is a sample of this type of question:

- 1) Thorough critics review books only after they have read everything else written by the author.

Begin with To be a thorough critic.

- (A) you had read
- (B) reading everything
- (C) they must have read
- (D) they would read
- (E) you must read

In the second type of question, students are asked to read a paragraph or two and then answer questions which test the students' comprehension and knowledge of style and rhetorical devices. Here is a sample question:

- 2) All of the following are ideas considered in the passage EXCEPT:

- (A) Good and evil are inseparably joined.
- (B) Man must be free to acquaint himself with all kinds of ideas.
- (C) The cultivation of real virtue depends on freedom of choice.
- (D) Heretical ideas can easily be identified and repressed.
- (E) Innocence protected from evil cannot be called virtue.

To score well on the first type of question, students must understand how to mold and remold language. The editing workshops and increased attention to revision will help students acquire this skill. Another helpful technique is sentence combining exercises done as a class activity. Most

AP teachers are familiar with sentence combining, and much has been written about its effectiveness. Perhaps the most appropriate sentence combining text for the AP class is William Strong's *Sentence Combining: A Composing Book* (Random House, 1973). Through sentence combining, students learn about the flexibility of language and how to test various linguistic options.

To score well on the second type of question, students must demonstrate keen analytical skills. If you use a class set of prose (non-fiction) anthologies in your AP class, time should be spent in analyzing the essays in terms of *content*, *style*, and *rhetorical fluency*. That is, the essays should not be used simply as *models*; students should learn to *read* critically as part of becoming good writers.

Frequently, Language and Composition teachers assign a prose reader, a rhetoric-handbook, and perhaps a sentence combining text. There are a bewildering number of texts to choose from, and no one text is any better suited for an AP class than another. Your regional ETS representative will be happy to recommend texts to be used in your AP class; however, many AP teachers find out what texts are used by nearby colleges and universities in their freshman English classes and then try to adopt identical or similar texts.

The Advanced Placement Language and Composition course is a challenge to teachers and students alike. There is no such thing as a *standard* AP course with an established curriculum; every course is as unique as its individual teacher. I hope, however, that this brief discussion will help the many new teachers of AP each year to construct a course that is meaningful both to themselves and to their students.

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