

FREE WEBINAR

Aiming for Sophistication in AP English

Reframe some of the conversation about the “sophistication point” and provide tested approaches for teaching the necessary skills.

WEDNESDAY, OCT. 29

7 P.M. EST



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“Aiming for Sophistication in AP English

October 2025



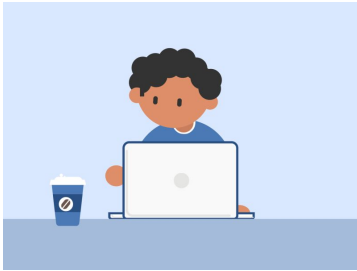
History of the Sophistication Point



- In early rubric drafts, it wasn't there
- Not *really* a unicorn
- It is teachable - not "jes nes se quoi"
- Don't focus on it
- Above and Beyond

Write for 3

What is YOUR understanding of sophistication? How do you communicate/explain it to your students?



3:00



1 point

Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or develops a complex literary argument.

Responses that earn this point may demonstrate a sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument by doing any of the following:

1. Identifying and exploring complexities or tensions within the poem.
2. Illuminating the student's interpretation by situating it within a broader context.
3. Accounting for alternative interpretations of the poem.
4. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.

* This point should be awarded only if the sophistication of thought or complex understanding is part of the student's argument, not merely a phrase or reference.

1 point

Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or develops a complex literary argument.

Responses that earn this point may demonstrate a sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument by doing any of the following:

1. Identifying and exploring complexities or tensions within the passage.
2. Illuminating the student's interpretation by situating it within a broader context.
3. Accounting for alternative interpretations of the passage.
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1 point

Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or develops a complex literary argument.

Responses that earn this point may demonstrate a sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument by doing any of the following:

1. Identifying and exploring complexities or tensions within the selected work.
2. Illuminating the student's interpretation by situating it within a broader context.
3. Accounting for alternative interpretations of the text.
4. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.

* This point should be awarded only if the sophistication of thought or complex understanding is part of the student's argument, not merely a phrase or reference.

AP Literature

General Keys to Sophistication

1. Complexities or Tensions
2. Broader Context
3. Alternative Interpretations
4. Persuasive



Consistent
Throughout and
Helps Argument

Path 1 Exploring complexities or tensions

- Nuances of specific words/phrases, connotation/denotation, double meanings
- Inner and outer conflicts
- Paradox
- Juxtaposition
- Irony
- How the title/epigraph/last line/shift/etc. complicates the meaning of the text

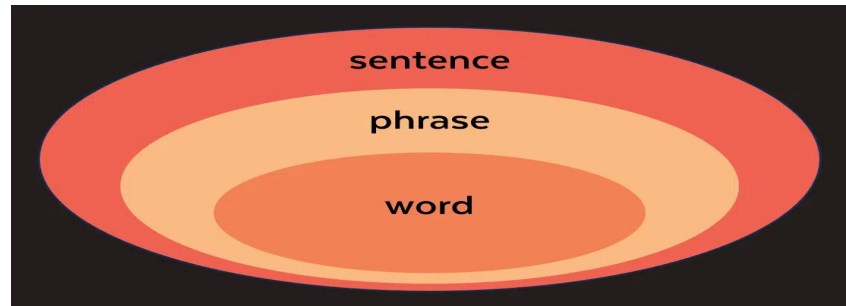
Must be consistent throughout

Path 1 Teaching Activities

1. Emphasize analysis at the word/phrase level. [The Street](#). This forces more focused and indepth analysis.

My rule: quotes no longer than seven words - preferably just words and phrases.

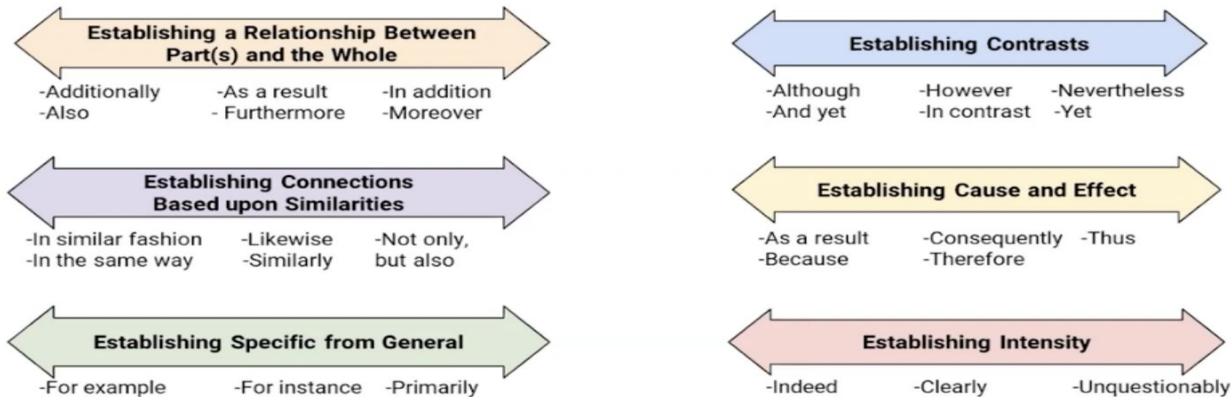
2. [Questions and sentence stems](#)
3. Choose the 5 most important words in a poem/excerpt - Choose one word and write a paragraph on how that word or two words play into an interpretation.
4. [Worst paragraph revision](#) or [Essay self-analysis](#)
5. Work on [embedding quotes](#).
6. Revise 1 + 4 + 0 samples to 1 + 4 + 1
7. Text Rendering



8. Question Like a 4 Year Old

9. Encourage students to use transitions which don't assure sophistication but better position students for exploring complexities and tensions.

How do we integrate commentary?

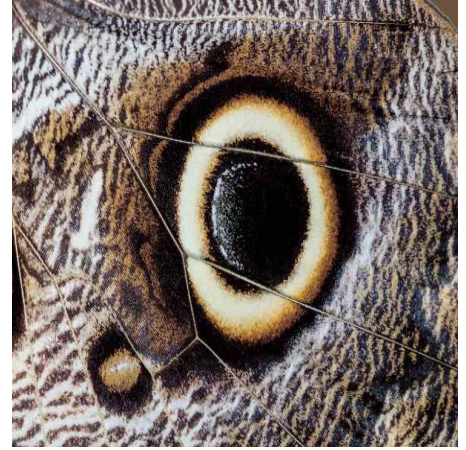


10. AP Daily Videos: Unit 9, 7.C, Video 1 (Carlos Escobar), Unit 7, 7.C, Video 2 (Susan Frediani)

Path 2 Placing a work in a broader context

- Historical Context
- Archetypes
- Allusions
- Symbol
- Literary Movements/Time Periods
- [Critical lens; *Frankenstein* critical lens essays](#)

Must be consistent throughout



Path 2 Teaching Activities

1. [Major Works Data Sheet](#)
2. Socratic seminars on novels
3. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*
4. Review prior knowledge - world history, archetypes, hero's journey, etc.

$$1 + 4 + 0 > 1 + 3 + 1$$

Path 3



Alternative Interpretation

I've got nothing here

Path 4 Vivid and Persuasive Writing

- Language is academic, not informal yet authentic writing voice (not forced)
- Embedded quotes throughout.
- Uses figurative language in analysis
- Elevated diction - lively, analytical words instead of boring, everyday words?
- Transition phrases or sentences to transition from one paragraph to another will help.

Advanced vocabulary, transitions, etc. do not guarantee - **must be consistent throughout**

Path 4 Teaching Activities

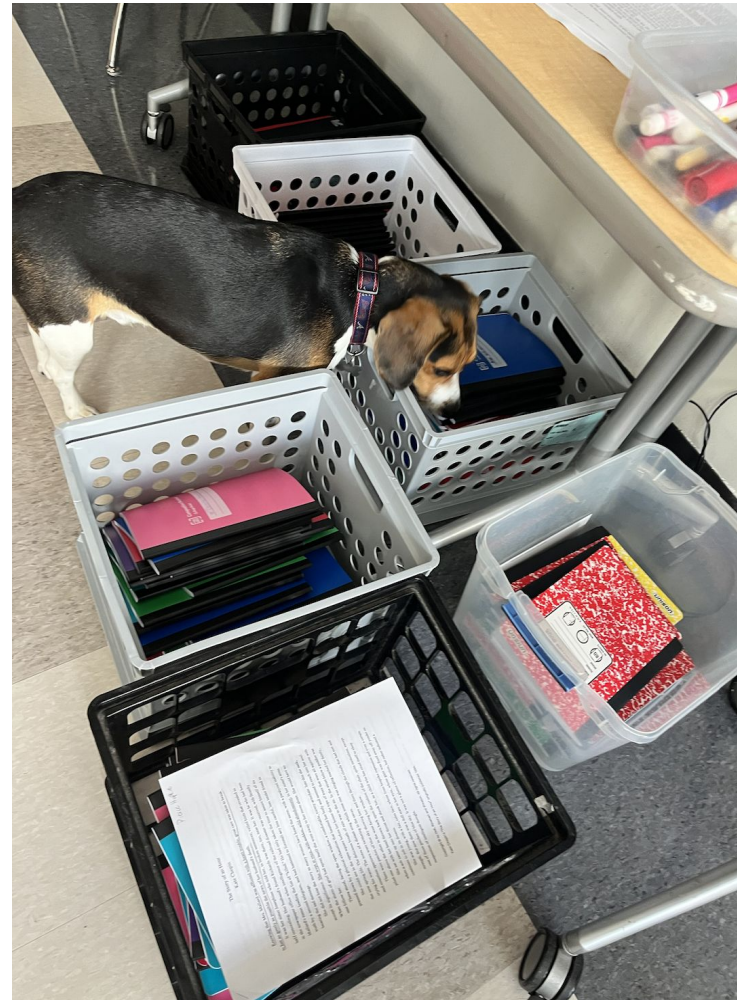
1. [Worst Paragraph Revision](#) ([sample](#))
2. [Essay Self Assessment](#)
3. [Academic Vocabulary \(CED terms\)](#)
4. [Strong verbs](#)
5. [Sentence variety](#)
6. [Transitions](#)
7. Mentor essays including
8. [samples](#) and [real world writing](#)
9. Revision
10. Writer's Notebook -
11. practice, practice, practice

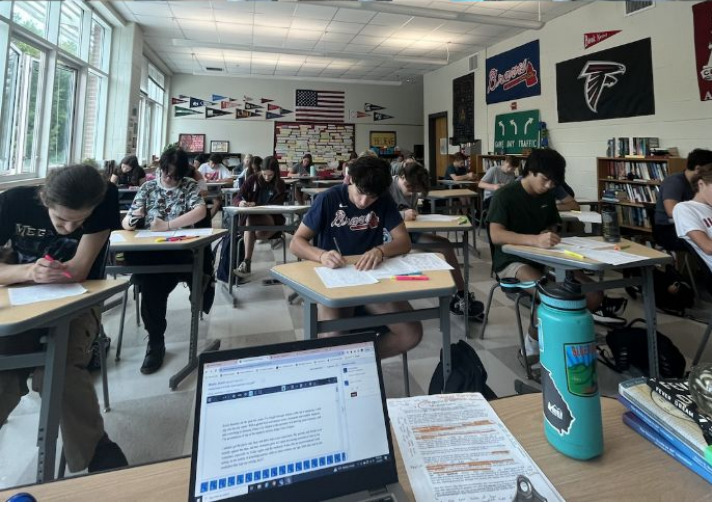
Fun practice:

[Writing Romantically](#) (Path 2 or 4)

[Two Sentence Horror Stories](#) (Path 4)

[Hand Turkey](#) (any path)





1 point

Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation.

Responses that earn this point may demonstrate sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation by doing any of the following:

1. Crafting a nuanced argument by consistently identifying and exploring complexities or tensions across the sources.
2. Articulating the implications or limitations of an argument (either the student's argument or arguments conveyed in the sources) by situating it within a broader context.
3. Making effective rhetorical choices that consistently strengthen the force and impact of the student's argument throughout the response.
4. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.

1 point

Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation.

Responses that earn this point may demonstrate sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation by doing any of the following:

1. Explaining the significance or relevance of the writer's rhetorical choices (given the rhetorical situation) "Broader Context"
2. Explaining a purpose or function of the passage complexities or tensions.
3. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive throughout the student's response.

1 point

Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation.

Responses that earn this point may demonstrate sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation by doing any of the following:

1. Crafting a nuanced argument by consistently identifying and exploring complexities or tensions
2. Articulating the implications or limitations of an argument (either the student's argument or an argument related to the prompt) by situating it within a broader context.
3. Making effective rhetorical choices that consistently strengthen the force and impact of the student's argument.
4. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive throughout the student's response.

General Keys to Sophistication

1. Complexities or Tensions
2. Broader Context
3. *Student's Own Rhetorical Choices (Syn and Arg)*
4. Persuasive

Consistent Throughout and Helps Argument

AP Language

General Keys to Sophistication

1. Complexities or Tensions
2. Broader Context
3. *Student's Own Rhetorical Choices (Syn and Arg)*
4. Persuasive

Consistent
Throughout and
Helps Argument

1. Thinking and Writing are Complex
 - a. Ideal/Real
 - b. Yin/Yang
2. Nothing Happens in a Vacuum
 - a. Big Ideas
 - b. Themes
 - c. "Everything is about something else—something bigger."
3. More than One Way to Understand Text or Issue
 - a. Opposing / Alternative Perspectives
4. Own Writing Choices Matter
 - a. "Everything you write affects your readers."

General Keys to Sophistication

1. Complexities or Tensions
2. Broader Context
3. Alternative Interpretations
4. Persuasive

Consistent
Throughout and
Helps Argument

Audience Matters

So much of it is about the audience: the readers of the essay

- Contexts
- Perspectives
- Persuasion

The Problem: Most students think of essays as things to get done, not as communicating thinking to a reader.



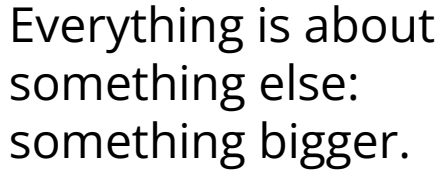
So, What's the [Sophistication] Point

The sophistication point is so important because it keeps pushing students to reach for true quality of writing and analysis. Without it, it really would be possible to simply teach analyzing texts and making arguments as a mechanical formula, which to would be extremely sad and would sap motivation for some students to continually improve (and some teachers to teach the class).

So, what's the [Sophistication] Point

From a FB Post by “AP Literature and Composition” Group member Maya Molly

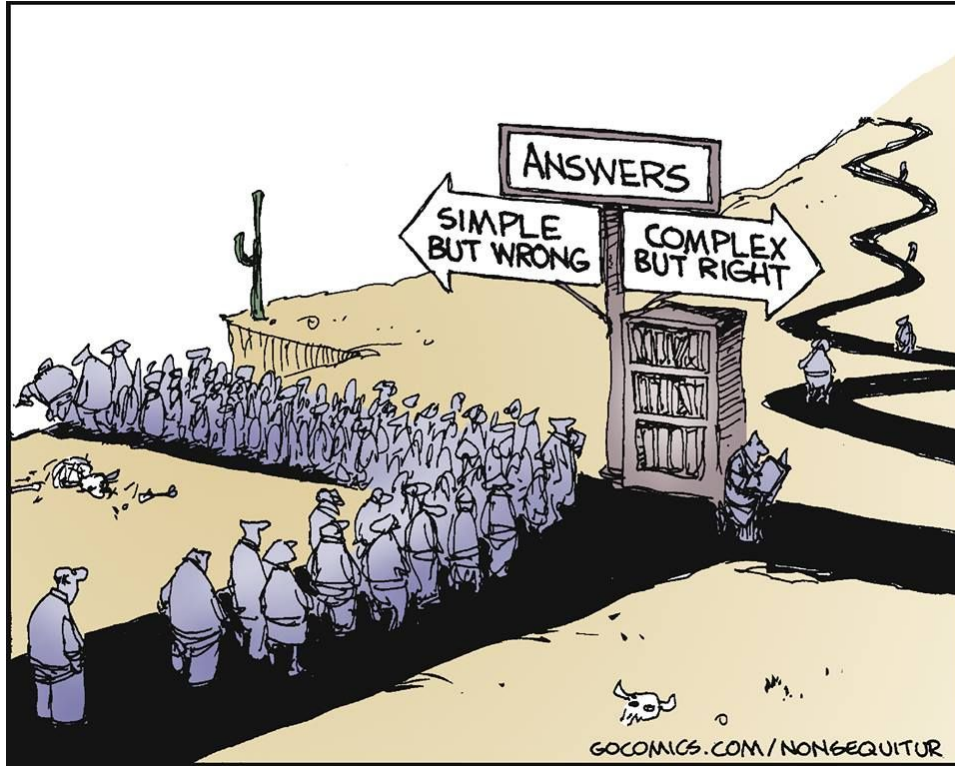
1. I don't spend much time deliberately "teaching" the sophistication point. It exists primarily so that there is a line of the rubric that isn't formulaic. I constantly tell my students that sophistication grows out of executing all other rows of the rubric particularly well—you need a complex thesis, close and insightful analysis of details, etc.
2. That said, I also constantly emphasize complexity, which I particularly define as embracing contradictions [and tensions] rather than running from them. So often students see something "odd" about a passage or poem that doesn't neatly fit their main thesis, so they ignore it in their essays. I also constantly tell them that the best thesis statements often hinge around a "yet"—works are chosen for the AP exam primarily BECAUSE they contain complexity/contradiction/tension/ambiguity instead of simple one-sided messages, so some kind of complexity/contradiction/tension/ambiguity is ALWAYS there.
3. I never tell my students to try to use "sophisticated" writing in their essays. Instead, I constantly emphasize that they must convey sophisticated meaning, which means choosing the right words to describe what they see. For example, a student-chosen metaphor in an essay that isn't in a poem may distract from their explanation of the writer's figurative language, so I discourage this, but an adjective that captures the right shade of tone can be beautifully effective.
4. If students have time, I encourage them to use their conclusion to set the themes of a work into a broader context, which I do think helps with the sophistication point. We also talk a lot about background and social context.
5. When I'm grading in-class work using the exam rubric, I give half points for each row. This is especially helpful for the thesis and sophistication points, which otherwise don't allow us to show degrees of strength.



Contrasts, Tensions, and Complexities often fall between **Romantic and Realistic** perspectives

<i>Individual</i>	vs	<i>Society</i>
Romantic	vs	Realist
Idealistic	vs	Realistic
Emotional	vs	Rational
Rural/Pastoral	vs	Urban/Metro
Natural	vs	Industrial
Natural	vs	Artificial
Rash	vs	Logical
Creative	vs	Pragmatic
Progressive	vs	Conservative
Religious	vs	Scientific
Innocent	vs	Experienced
Naive	vs	Worldly





Addressing Sophistication

- A. Revise Everything
 - a. Students do timed-writing. You do mini-lessons based off of what they need. Then revise.
 - b. Then, let them have those with them as models when they work on other essays.
- B. Push reading and interpretation to big ideas and complexity*
 - a. Everything is about something bigger
 - b. Nothing is simple
- C. Build, Model, Build, Model, Bui...
 - a. Write with them and share what you are doing and why
 - b. Let them have those a models, build their own, then use them... rinse and repeat
- D. Teach sentence level writing and revision
 - a. Revisit their drafts as a class and use those drafts to show how to revise sentences to make better ideas
- E. Give them checklists of things to do during and in revision of timed writing

[AP Lit Sample Paragraphing - Different Levels](#)

[Stylistic Moves Toward Sophistication](#)

AP English Literature and Composition – FRQ 2: Prose Analysis – One-Page Rubric for **CLASSROOM** use.

AP English Literature and Composition – FRQ 2: Prose Analysis – One-Page Rubric for CLASSROOM use.						
Reporting Categories	Scoring Criteria					
Row A Thesis (0-1 points) 7.B	0 points For any of the following: - There is no defensible thesis. - The intended thesis only restates the prompt. - The intended thesis provides a summary of the issue with no apparent or coherent claim. - There is a thesis, but it does not respond to the prompt.					
Row B Evidence AND Commentary (0-4 points) 7.A 7.C 7.D 7.E	0 points Simply restates thesis (if present), repeats provided information, or offers information irrelevant to the prompt.	1 point EVIDENCE: Provides evidence that is mostly general. AND COMMENTARY: Summarizes the evidence but does not explain how the evidence supports the student’s argument.	2 points EVIDENCE: Provides some specific relevant evidence. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence relates to the student’s argument, but no line of reasoning is established, or the line of reasoning is faulty.		3 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence supports a line of reasoning. AND Explains how at least one literary element or technique in the passage contributes to its meaning.	4 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Consistently explains how the evidence supports a line of reasoning. AND Explains how multiple literary elements or techniques in the passage contribute to its meaning.
Row C Sophistication (0-1 points) 7.C 7.D 7.E	0 points Does not meet the criteria for one point.					
			Responses that earn this point may demonstrate a sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument by doing any of the following: - Identifying and exploring complexities or tensions within the poem. - Illuminating the student’s interpretation by situating it within a broader context. - Accounting for alternative interpretations of the poem. - Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.			

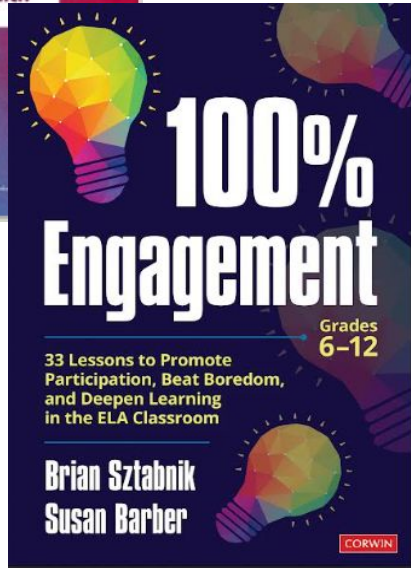
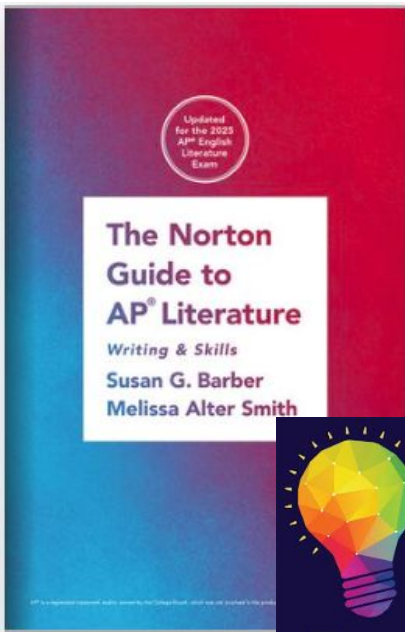


AND... It Does Matter Beyond the Exam

Q_s from U

We are risk takers
and mistake makers

(thanks Andy)



Susan Barber -

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Helping Students Earn the Sophistication Point in AP English

 *Dr. Brandon Abdon*

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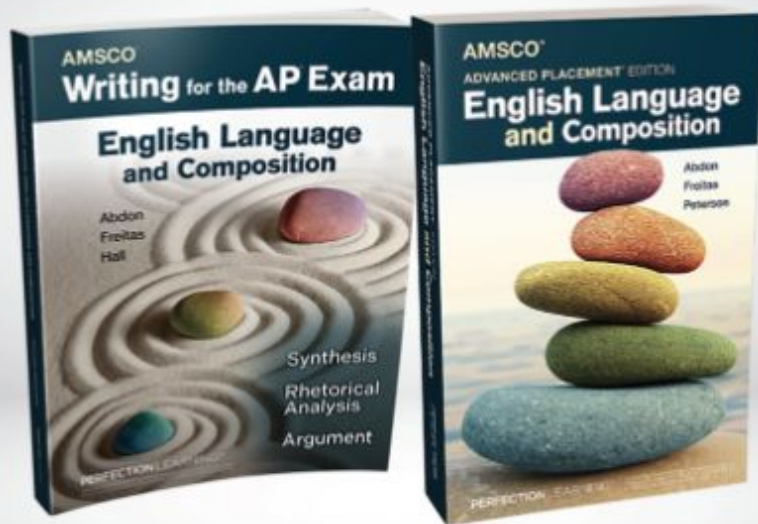
Every May, AP readers hear the same refrain: “The sophistication point is a unicorn.” But that’s not quite right. Unicorns don’t exist. The sophistication point does. It’s elusive, yes—but it shows up often enough to remind us that it’s real and achievable. Students can and do earn it. The challenge for teachers is helping students move past formulas and into writing that demonstrates genuine nuance, control, and depth. **It’s also important to remember that the sophistication point is *not required* to earn the highest possible score on the exam.** Many students earn a “5” on their exams without any of the three essays earning it—but when students can demonstrate sophistication in the high-pressure setting of a timed exam, they deserve this as a sort of reward.

What Sophistication Really Means

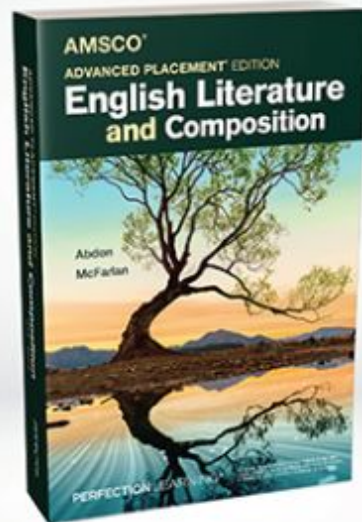
Sophistication isn’t about big words, long sentences, or forced ornamentation. Students don’t earn it just by using “therefore” and “moreover” or by padding essays with unnecessary commentary. They have to do things strategically and thoughtfully.

Instead, sophistication reveals itself when students:

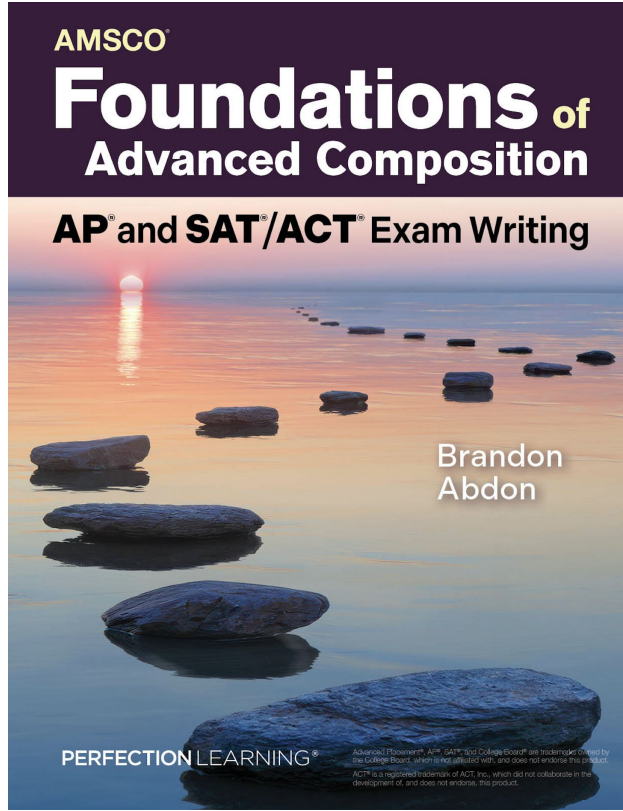




AP English Language and Composition



AP English Literature and Composition



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 - Lessons with question types for each
 - Each lesson aligned to standards or expectations for each



Please do the survey
&
Please be in touch

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susangbarber@gmail.com

thank you!