



Introduction to the Argumentative Essay

IN THIS CHAPTER

Summary: Examination of the argumentative essay and its purpose as it is presented in the AP English Language exam.



Key Ideas

- ★ Learn to take a position/stand on a situation (defend, qualify, refute) given in the argumentative prompt.
- ★ Familiarize yourself with strategies to support your position.
- ★ Learn the basics of constructing the argumentative essay in response to the AP English Language prompt.

Some Basics

The second type of essay on the Advanced English Language exam is the argumentative essay. Because it is often seen as a “giveaway,” many students believe it to be the easiest of the three essays to write. Unfortunately, too many students spend too little time in the actual planning of this essay and, as a result, present an underdeveloped, illogical, or off-topic piece. Although there is a great deal of latitude given for the response to the prompt, the argumentative essay demands careful reading and planning.

What Does the Argumentative Essay Require of Me?

Basically, you need to do three things:

- understand the nature of the position taken in the prompt;
- take a specific stand—argue, qualify, or disagree—with the assertion in the prompt; and
- clearly and logically support your claim.

What Does It Mean to Agree, Disagree, or Qualify?

An argumentative essay on the AP English Language and Composition exam will present you with an excerpt or a statement. Once you understand what the passage is saying, you have to ask yourself: Do I think about this subject in the same way as the writer/speaker? (Agree) Do I think the writer/speaker is totally wrong? (Disagree) Do I think some of what is said is correct and some incorrect? (Qualify) Regardless of the synonyms used, these are the three choices you will have.

Timing and Planning the Essay



How Should I Approach the Writing of My Argumentative Essay?

Before beginning to actually write the essay, you need to do some quick planning. You could brainstorm a list of ideas, construct a chart, or create an outline. Whatever it is, you **MUST** find a way to allow yourself to think through the issue and your position.

Once I've Chosen My Position on the Given Issue, How Do I Go About Supporting It?

Remember that you've been taught how to write an argument throughout your school years, and you've even studied it in detail in your AP Comp course this year. Here is a brief overview of the kinds of support/evidence you could include to bolster your argument:

- | | | |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| — facts/statistics | — needed definitions | — anecdotes |
| — details | — recognition of | — contrast and comparison |
| — quotations | the opposition | — cause and effect |
| — dialog | — examples | — appeal to authority |

Just make certain to choose the strategy or strategies that are most familiar to you and with which you feel most comfortable. Don't try to "con" your reader or pad your essay with irrelevancies.

Does It Matter What Tone I Take in My Argumentative Essay?

The College Board and the AP Comp readers are open to a wide range of approaches. You can choose to be informal and personal, formal and objective, or even humorous and irreverent, and anything in between. Just be certain that your choice is appropriate for your purpose.

Will I Be Penalized for Taking an Unpopular, Unexpected, Irreverent, or Bizarre Position on the Given Issue?

As long as you are addressing the prompt and appropriately supporting your position, there is no danger of your losing points on your essay because you've decided to take a different

approach. Your essay is graded for process and mastery and manipulation of language, not for how close you come to the viewpoint of your reader.

How Should I Plan to Spend My Time Writing the Argumentative Essay?

Learning to budget your time is a skill that can be most helpful in writing the successful essay. The following is a sample timeline for you to consider:

- 1–3 minutes reading and working the prompt
- 3 minutes deciding on a position
- 10–12 minutes planning the support of your position
- 20 minutes writing the essay
- 3 minutes proofreading

Working the Prompt



Before beginning to write, you **MUST** spend some time carefully reading and deconstructing the prompt. (We call this “working the prompt.”) Your success depends upon your clearly understanding what is expected of you.

Below is the prompt of the third essay on the Diagnostic/Master exam.

In his famous “Vast Wasteland” address to the National Association of Broadcasters in May of 1961, Newton Minow, the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, spoke about the power of television to influence the taste, knowledge, and opinions of its viewers around the world. Carefully read the following, paying close attention to how timely it is today, especially in light of the worldwide Internet.

Minow ended his speech warning that “The power of instantaneous sight and sound is without precedent in mankind’s history. This is an awesome power. It has limitless capabilities for good—and for evil. And it carries with it awesome responsibilities—responsibilities which you and [the government] cannot escape . . .”

Using your own knowledge and your own experiences or reading, write a carefully constructed essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Minow’s ideas.

DO THIS NOW.

Highlight the essential elements of the prompt.

(Time yourself.) How long did it take you? _____

Compare your highlighting of the prompt with ours.

In his famous “**Vast Wasteland**” address to the **National Association of Broadcasters** in May of **1961**, **Newton Minow**, the **Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission**, spoke about the **power of television to influence the taste, knowledge, and opinions of its viewers around the world**. Carefully read the following, paying close attention to how **timely** it is today, especially in light of the worldwide **Internet**.

Minow ended his speech **warning** that “**The power of instantaneous sight and sound is without precedent in mankind’s history**. This is an **awesome power**. It has **limitless capabilities for good—and for evil**. And it carries with it **awesome responsibilities**—responsibilities which **you and [the government] cannot escape . . .**”

Using your **own knowledge** and your **own experiences** or **reading**, write a carefully constructed essay that **defends, challenges, or qualifies Minow's ideas**.

For this prompt, anything else you may have highlighted is extraneous.



The prompt asks the student to defend, challenge, or qualify Minow's ideas. Notice that it does NOT state "all," "some," or a "specific number." Therefore, the student has freedom of choice. (This is similar to the "such as" instructions in other prompts.)

Developing the Opening Paragraph

NOW, BEGIN TO PLAN YOUR ESSAY.

Write your introductory paragraph. Make certain to

- refer specifically to the prompt; and
- clearly state your position on the given issue.

The following are three sample opening paragraphs.

A

I agree with Newton Minow's assertion to the National Association of Broadcasters that "The power of instantaneous sight and sound is . . . an awesome power . . . [with] capabilities for good—and for evil." However, I disagree with his placing the responsibility for this power squarely in the hands of the broadcasters and the government.

B

Imagine—you have limitless capabilities for good and evil—you, not Superman, can control the world with your super powers. And, what are your powers? Do you have x-ray vision, morphability, immortality? NO, you have the most awesome power ever devised—you can instantaneously influence the taste, knowledge, and opinions of mankind around the world. You are Supernet! and you have a super headache because you agree with Newton Minow, who warned the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961 that "You have an awesome responsibility."

C

Nowhere is the awesome power for good and evil of modern technology more clearly seen than in the Internet's pervasiveness and influence. Newton Minow was right on target in 1961 when he warned the National Association of Broadcasters that the power of TV has "limitless capabilities for good—and for evil."

Each of these opening paragraphs does the job required of an introduction to an argumentative essay on the AP English Language and Composition exam.

- Each cites the speaker and the occasion.
- Each clearly states the writer's position on the given issue.

Let's look at what is different about each of the paragraphs.

Sample A qualifies the assertion presented by Minow. The writer agrees with the potential of the power but disagrees about who should take responsibility.

Sample B agrees with Minow's position but treats the assertion in a lighthearted fashion. The reader can expect a humorous and possibly irreverent tone in the essay.

Sample C indicates a writer who has obviously decided to limit the area of the argument to that of the Internet and has chosen to agree with Minow.

Note: Given the subject matter, this prompt does not lend itself easily to a negative position. However, if a creative thinker and writer were to assert such a viewpoint, it would not be penalized.

Which of the above samples is similar to your opening paragraph? Are there any changes you would make in yours?

Developing the Body of the Essay

DO THIS NOW.

— Plan the body of your argumentative essay.



A sample strategy for planning the Minow essay follows. After carefully reading and deconstructing the prompt, we decided to use Minow's own three-part warning to the NAB. We brainstormed for ideas that could be linked to each of the categories. (Remember, ideas about how to organize or approach your essay can sometimes be found in the excerpt itself.)

GOOD

- education
- warning of dangers
- recognition of heroes
- involvement in humankind's achievements
- instant communications with family and friends
- medical care
- links to the world for the the disabled, elderly, isolated
- entertainment

EVIL

- promote hate
- distort reality
- help terrorists
- invasion of privacy
- threats to national security
- create mass hysteria
- exploit children
- fraud
- conspiracy
- subvert elections
- brainwashing

RESPONSIBILITY

- laws
- censorship
- self-censorship
- prior restraint
- 1st Amendment
- 4th Amendment
- financial gain
- copyrights
- parental control
- v-chip
- personal checks and balances

Once you've completed your initial planning, in our case brainstorming, you must choose those specific items you will be best able to use to support and develop your argument. We limited ours to the following.

GOOD

- instant communications
- medical treatment
- entertainment

EVIL

- promote hate
- exploit children
- create mass hysteria

RESPONSIBILITY

- personal checks and balances
- laws

This type of chart will provide you as a writer with a structure for your presentation. You are now ready to write the body of your essay based on your carefully considered choices.

Below are three sample body paragraphs which are based on the chart on page 100.

Body Paragraph on “Good”

One of the most rewarding applications of the Internet is its ability to provide instant communication between friends and family. A grandmother-to-be in New York is able to share in the moment by moment experience of her daughter’s pregnancy and her granddaughter Daisy’s birth in California through e-mail, scanned photos and quick videos. Likewise, the ability to instantly communicate with others may have saved the life of a doctor stranded at the South Pole. Her contact with medical resources and experts via the Internet enabled her to undergo surgery and treatment for breast cancer. Research and innovations in medical treatment are now available to those around the world via the “Net.” Similarly, the ability for instant communication enables millions to enjoy concerts, sports events, theatrical presentations and other cultural activities without ever having to leave home. These wonderful benefits are all because of the fabulous and awesome technological creation—the Internet.

Body Paragraph on “Evil”

The other side of the mass communication coin has the face of evil on it. The Internet offers hate mongers unlimited access to anyone with a connection to the World Wide Web. Groups like the Neo-Nazis can spread their hate messages to susceptible minds via bright, entertaining and engaging websites. What looks like a simple, fun game can easily reinforce the group’s hate-filled philosophy to unsuspecting browsers. With the potential for millions of “hits” each week, it does not take a rocket scientist to perceive the danger here. This danger is also present with the minds and bodies of curious and vulnerable young people. Because of its easy access and easy production, “kiddie porn” is both possible and available via the Internet and the films any number of porn sites offer for downloading with the mere click of a keyboard key. Through contacts made through e-mail and/or chat rooms on the Net, children can be easily fooled and led to contact those who would abuse their bodies and minds for a quick profit or cheap thrill. With instantaneous messaging, whether real or imagined, positive or negative, a single person or group can set into motion mass hysteria just by warning of an impending disaster, such as a flood, fire, bomb, poison, and so on. There are obviously many more possibilities floating out there in the ethernet. These are just three of the evil ones.

Body Paragraph on “Responsibility”

Just as there is the potential for both good and evil with regard to mass communication, so too is there the potential for both beneficial and destructive strategies related to responsibilities. The most powerful regulator of our responsibility as individuals is our finger and its power to press a button or double click on a key and to “just say no.” With this slight pressure, we are able to exert monumental pressure on those who produce programs, websites, photos, documents, etc., which we find unacceptable. Who better to tell us what to watch, what to do, and what to think? All too often many people prefer to abdicate their personal responsibility and give that power to either the government or the communication industry. We must never forget that dictators target the control and censorship of mass media as the first step in the total control of the minds and hearts of the populace. The laws, which we as citizens of a democracy look to, must never impinge upon our First and Fourth Amendment rights. Each of us has the right of free speech, and each of us has the right to privacy. None of us has the right to harm others or to limit the rights of others; why, then, would we give that right to the communication industry or to the government?



Regarding a concluding paragraph, our advice is to spend your time in planning and writing the body of your essay rather than worrying about a concluding paragraph. With a brief essay, you can be certain that your reader can remember what you've already said, so there is no need to summarize your major points or to repeat the prompt. If you feel you must have a concluding statement/remark, by all means do so. But, make certain it is a FINAL remark that is of interest and is appropriate to your purpose. You may want to use the last sentence of your last body paragraph as your concluding comment. For example, the final sentences in the first and third sample body paragraphs could be used as the conclusion to the essay.

DO THIS NOW.

Spend about 20 minutes writing the body of your essay. Make certain that your essay follows your plan.

Sample Student Essays

The following are two sample student essays.

Student A

When Newton Minow ended his speech in May, 1961, he warned that, “The power of instantaneous sight and sound is without precedent . . . [and] it has limitless capabilities for good—and for evil.” I wholeheartedly agree with both Minow’s position about modern technology, especially about how it relates to the Internet today and the responsibility facing its users. 1

Scene One—Pre-1980’s. Big project. Long haul to the library, gazing despondently until your eyes resemble those of a zombie. Too many books, too little time, in short, just TOO much. Scene Two—mid-1990’s. A two-foot walk to the computer, and Voila! All the information you’d ever need is at your fingertips. The Internet has truly revolutionized how people can obtain their information. Now, more than ever, it is easier and quicker to access all types of information from “Exactly what IS that fungus growing on my toe?” to “What are the names of every major river system in the continental United States?” The plethora of information enables people to almost cease the burdensome trip to the library and halt the overwhelming feelings of dread they find as they stare blankly at a stack of books. With the schedule of the typical American today, there’s hardly enough time to breathe, nevermind attempting to fit that hour-long trip to the library in the time frame. With the birth of the Internet, people with access to a computer can locate information faster than ever. But, how are we to judge the acceptability of that information? 2

The awesome power of these new technological inventions, such as computers and the Internet, do not always produce, however, grade-A products. People have begun to utilize the Internet to recruit new cult members, to teach people how to build bombs, 3

to teach hate. Basically, anything and everything evil can be posted on the “Net.” Scene Three. Mr. Parker, a 75-year-old man from rural Indiana is in severe pain with abdominal cramps. Instead of attempting a two-hour drive to the nearest hospital, he makes it to his computer, logs on to the Internet in hopes of finding out what is wrong with him and in hopes of finding a quick remedy. Following the www’s advice, he treats himself for stomach pain. Scene Four. Poor Mr. Parker dies hours later of acute appendicitis.

The Internet has the power to give birth to both good and evil. Today, as our society becomes more and more advanced, we rely more and more on anything that promises to make our busy lives less hectic. The easy way out, it seems, is always the right way in. Call it our American laziness, or call it our penchant to make learning easier, either way you slice it, the Internet has the potential for both positive and negative effects on society. Our responsibility is to find ways to exhibit our ability to distinguish between that which is beneficial and that which is destructive.

Student B

In his now famous address to the National Association of Broadcasters in May, 1961, FCC chairman Newton Minow spoke of the unprecedented power that those who control television’s programming have over the American public, and how the mass media should be controlled and censored by the government, for it could wield awesome amounts of either good or evil. This assertion, that “television is a vast wasteland” rings true throughout the modern history of American society, especially in light of the global Internet.

There is no doubt that television has greatly altered the very psyche of Americans countless times since Minow’s speech. From patriotic events like Neil Armstrong’s first step on the moon and the “miracle on the ice” American victory over the Soviet Union in the 1980 Olympic hockey semi-finals, to historical events like Tiananmen Square, the assassination of JFK, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Television has provided Americans with triumph—the Persian Gulf War—and tragedy—the Columbine massacre. Most importantly, however, it is entertainment for the masses, and is affordable to the point that 95% of Americans watch at least once a week, and this is where it goes awry.

Americans, due to the overwhelming economic prosperity and technological revolution of the last forty years, have become slovenly. We can get almost anywhere in the world within 24 hours via airplane and expect to be waited on while flying there. We drive to work everyday. We have every type of cuisine imaginable less than twenty minutes away, contrasting with several countries which don’t have food, period. We have secure incomes, capital growth, and all of the material comforts of the day. We have the Internet, the new mass media which allows for anyone to learn about anything at anytime, anywhere. We are inactive, obese, materialistic, boring people, and television has adapted itself to fit our collective personas. Or possibly, we changed for television.

The nightly news is filled with images of death, suffering, pain, agony, misery, and other horrors that we gobble up because we as middle-class Americans have an infinitesimal chance of ever seeing it. The most popular TV shows are either irreverent comedies like “Seinfeld” and “Friends” with no actual cultural impact, or worse game shows like “Weakest Link” or “Survivor” that reward, in pride and prizes, ruthlessness, emotional warfare, and pointless competition that reinforces those attributes in the 30 million viewers they get every Monday and Wednesday night. The sensationalistic television programming caters to every evil desire we have, so it makes them grow inside us and want more, making us fervent to tune in next week for the next fantastic episode. God forbid they show a rerun.

Television has become a wasteland, and it’s turning Western culture into one, too. One has to believe Newton Minow knew what he was talking about. In a classic quote from *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller writes that “There was a general consensus that the platitudes of Americanism were horsesh-t.” I wholeheartedly agree.

Rating the Essays



High-Range Essays (9, 8)

- Correctly identifies Minow’s position regarding the power of television and other forms of mass communication
- Effectively presents a position about Minow’s own ideas
- Clear writer’s voice
- Successfully defends his or her position
- Presents carefully reasoned arguments making appropriate reference to specific examples from personal experience
- Clear and effective organization
- Effectively manipulates language
- Few, if any, syntactical errors

Mid-Range Essays (7, 6, 5)

- Correctly identifies Minow’s position and attitude about television and mass communications
- Understands the demands of the prompt
- Clearly states a position with regard to that of Minow
- Presents a generally adequate argument that makes use of appropriate examples
- Ideas clearly stated
- Less well-developed than the high-range essays
- A few lapses in diction and/or syntax

Low-Range Essays (4, 3, 2, 1)

- Inadequate response to the prompt
- Misunderstands, oversimplifies, or misrepresents Minow’s position
- Insufficient or inappropriate examples used to develop the writer’s position
- Lack of mature control of the elements of essay writing

For this argumentative essay, almost all of the writers understood that Minow was commenting on the power of television and were able to comment on the timeliness of his assertions. In their essays, student writers attempted to distinguish between good and bad effects of modern technology, especially the Internet, and many illustrated their claims with fine examples of the power of this technology. They recognized the potential for inciting violence, for learning, for conformity, and for influencing political opinions and outcomes. The majority only touched upon power and influence, but the high-range essays recognized the subtlety of the responsibility of television and the Internet.

Most, if not all, student writers agreed with Minow, but few offered any real examination of the need for responsibility with regard to the advances in technology. Some were cautious about First Amendment rights, and a few saw the government as the chief “overseer.”

Student A

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

- a strong, mature voice willing to be creative as well as analytical;
- clear statement about the writer’s position on Minow’s assertion;
- overall structure clearly defined through “scenes”;
- original illustrations and details to support writer’s position;
- tight focus;
- mature vocabulary and sentence structure; and
- brief response to Minow’s challenge about responsibility regarding the media.

This high-range essay, although brief, does the work of a mature, clear, and responsive writer. The assertion and support for it are well organized and developed in a very clear writer’s voice.

Student B

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

- evidence that the writer understood the question and prompt;
- indication of a writer’s voice;
- does not connect all parts of the essay, especially in paragraph 3, with the topic;
- includes interesting and varied details and examples to support the thesis;
- some obviously incorrect assumptions [paragraph 4, sentence 2];
- a few problems with diction and syntax [fragment in paragraph 4, sentence 2]; [“slovenly” in paragraph 3, sentence 1], [“fervent” in paragraph 4, next to last sentence];
- an interesting style and content; and
- does not really address the responsibility issue.

This mid-range essay indicates a writer who is a risk taker and intellectually curious. At times, the writer’s enthusiasm seems to get in the way of a clear focus.

Rapid Review

- Create an argument.
 - understand the position or assertion
 - agree, disagree, or qualify
 - support your point of view

- Work the prompt.
 - read and deconstruct the assignment
 - highlight
- Plan the essay.
- Address the opposition.
- Allow for final remarks.
- Write the essay.
- Read the sample essays and rubrics.
- Score your own essay.

Rating the Essays

One of the main goals of this assignment is to help you understand how to write an effective argument. This is a high-level essay for the following reasons:

- a strong, clear thesis statement
- clear argument about the writer's position on Milow's assertion
- overall structure clearly defined through "scans"
- original illustrations and details to support writer's position
- tight focus
- mature vocabulary and sentence structure
- direct response to Milow's challenge about responsibility regarding the media

This high-level essay, although brief, does the work of a longer, clearer, more developed essay. It is well organized and developed, and it shows the writer's voice.

Another good example of a high-level essay is the following argument:

- evidence that the writer understood the question and prompt
- indication of a writer's voice
- does not connect all parts of the claim, especially in paragraph 3, with the topic
- includes interesting and varied details and examples to support the thesis
- some obviously incorrect assumptions (paragraph 4, sentence 3)
- a few problems with diction and syntax (fragment in paragraph 4, sentence 3; "low" and "in paragraph 4, sentence 1"; "low" in paragraph 4, sentence 1)
- an interesting style and content
- does not really address the responsibility issue

This high-level essay indicates a writer who is a bit less organized and less clearly focused. The writer's cohesion seems to be in the way of a clear focus.

These arguments are well developed and show a clear focus.

Rapid Review

- Create an argument
 - understand the position or assertion to support
 - choose a position or assertion to support
 - understand the position or assertion to support
 - understand the position or assertion to support
- Lack of cohesion