

Past AP Language ARGUMENT Prompts (some adaptations)

2012

Consider the distinct perspective expressed in the following statements:

“If you develop the absolute sense of certainty that powerful beliefs provide, then you can get yourself to accomplish virtually anything, including those things that other people are certain are impossible.” (William Phelps)

“I think we ought always to entertain our opinions with some measure of doubt. I shouldn’t wish people dogmatically to believe any philosophy, not even mine.” (Bertrand Russell)

In a well-organized essay, take a position on the relationship between certainty and doubt. Support your argument with appropriate evidence and examples.

2011-A

The following passage is from *Rights of Man*, a book written by the pamphleteer Thomas Paine in 1791. Born in England, Paine was an intellectual, a revolutionary, and a supporter of American independence from England. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay that examines the extent to which Paine’s characterization of America holds true today. Use appropriate evidence to support your argument.

If there is a country in the world, where concord, according to common calculation, would be least expected, it is America. Made up, as it is, of people from different nations, accustomed to different forms and habits of government, speaking different languages, and more different in their modes of worship, it would appear that the union of such a people was impracticable; but by the simple operation of constructing government on the principles of society and the rights of man, every difficulty retires, and all the parts are brought into cordial unison. There, the poor are not oppressed, the rich are not privileged. . . . Their taxes are few, because their government is just; and as there is nothing to render them wretched, there is nothing to engender riots and tumults.

2011-B

American essayist and social critic H. L. Mencken (1880-1956) wrote, “The average man does not want to be free. He simply wants to be safe.” In a well-written essay, examine the extent to which Mencken’s observation applies to contemporary society, supporting your position with appropriate evidence.

2010A

In his 2004 book, *Status Anxiety*, Alain de Botton argues that the chief aim of humorists is not merely to entertain but “to convey with impunity messages that might be dangerous or impossible to state directly.” Because society allows humorists to say things that other people cannot or will not say, de Botton sees humorists as serving a vital function in society. Think about the implications of de Botton’s view of the role of humorists (cartoonists, stand-up comics, satirical writers, hosts of television programs, etc.). Then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies de Botton’s claim about the vital role of humorists. Use specific, appropriate evidence to develop your position.

2010B

The first Buy Nothing Day—a day on which people are urged to purchase no goods—was organized in Canada in 1992 as a way to increase awareness of excessive consumerism. A Buy Nothing Day has been held yearly since then in many nations. An online article, “Buy Nothing Day: 2006 Press Release,” urged worldwide acceptance of taking a “24-hour consumer detox as part of the 14th annual Buy Nothing Day” in order to “expose the environmental and ethical consequences of overconsumption” (Buy Nothing Day,” courtesy Adbusters, www.adbusters.org). Consider the implications of a day on which no goods are purchased. Then write an essay in which you develop a position on the establishment of an annual Buy Nothing Day. Support your argument with appropriate evidence.

2009-A

“Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant.” -Horace

Consider this quotation about adversity from the Roman poet Horace. Then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Horace's assertion about the role that adversity or political hardship, danger, misfortune, etc.) plays in developing a person's character. Support your argument with appropriate evidence from your reading, observation or experience.

2009-B

The passage below is from *The Worst Years of Our Lives* by Barbara Ehrenreich. Ehrenreich is writing about life in the 1980s. Read the passage carefully and then write an essay in which you support, refute, or qualify Ehrenreich's assertions about television. Support your argument with appropriate evidence.

Only after many months of viewing did I begin to understand the force that has transformed the American people into root vegetables. If you watch TV for a very long time, day in, day out, you will begin to notice something eerie and unnatural about the world portrayed therein. I don't mean that it is two-dimensional or lacks a well-developed critique of the capitalist consumer culture or something superficial like that. I mean something so deeply obvious that it's almost scary: when you watch television, you will see people doing many things—chasing fast cars, drinking lite beer, shooting each other at close range, etc. But you will never see people watching television. Well, maybe for a second, before the phone rings or a brand-new, multiracial adopted child walks into the house. But never really watching, hour after hour, the way real people do. Way back in the beginning of the television era, this was not so strange, because real people actually did many of the things people do on TV, even if it was only bickering with their mothers-in-law about which toilet paper to buy. But modern people, i.e., couch potatoes, do nothing that is ever shown on television (because it is either dangerous or would involve getting up from the couch). And what they do do—watch television—is far too boring to be televised for more than a fraction of a second, not even by Andy Warhol, bless his boredom-proof little heart. So why do we keep on watching?

2008-A

For years corporations have sponsored high school sports. Their ads are found on the outfield fence at baseball parks or on the walls of the gymnasium, the football stadium, or even the locker room. Corporate logos are even found on players' uniforms. But some schools have moved beyond corporate sponsorship of sports to allowing "corporate partners" to place their names and ads on all kinds of school facilities--libraries, music rooms, cafeterias. Some schools accept money to require students to watch Channel One, a news program that includes advertising. And schools often negotiate exclusive contracts with soft drink or clothing companies.

Some people argue that corporate partnerships are a necessity for cash-strapped schools. Others argue that schools should provide an environment free from ads and corporate influence. Using appropriate evidence, write an essay in which you evaluate the pros and cons of corporate sponsorship for schools and indicate why you find one position more persuasive than the other.

2008-B

Read the following excerpt from *The Decline of Radicalism* (1969) by Daniel J. Boorstin and consider the implications of the distinction Boorstin makes between dissent and disagreement. Then, using appropriate evidence, write a carefully reasoned essay in which you defend, challenge, or qualify Boorstin's distinction:

Dissent is the great problem of America today. It overshadows all others. It is a symptom, an expression, a consequence, and a cause of all others.

*I say dissent and not disagreement. And it is the distinction between dissent and disagreement which I really want to make. Disagreement produces debate but dissent produces dissension. Dissent (which comes from the Latin, *dis* and *sentire*) means originally to feel apart from others.*

People who disagree have an argument, but people who dissent have a quarrel. People may disagree and both may count themselves in the majority. But a person who dissents is by definition in a minority. A liberal society thrives on disagreement but is killed by dissension. Disagreement is the life blood of democracy, dissension is its cancer.

2007-A

A weekly feature of *The New York Times Magazine* is a column by Randy Cohen called "The Ethicist," in which people raise ethical questions to which Cohen provides answers. The question below is from the column that appeared on April 4, 2003.

At my high school, various clubs and organizations sponsor charity drives, asking students to bring in money, food, and clothing. Some teachers offer bonus points on tests and final averages as incentives to participate. Some parents believe that this sends a morally wrong message, undermining the value of charity as a selfless act. Is the exchange of donations for grades O.K.?

The practice of offering incentives for charitable acts is widespread, from school projects to fund drives by organizations such as public television stations, to federal income tax deductions for contributions to charities. In a well-written essay, develop a position on the ethics of offering incentives for charitable acts. Support your position with evidence from your reading, observation, and/or experience.

2007-B

In the introduction to her book *Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking*, investigative journalist Jessica Mitford (1917-1996) confronts accusations that she is a "muckraker." While the term was used by United States President Theodore Roosevelt in a 1906 speech to insult journalists who had, in his opinion, gone too far in the pursuit of their stories, the term "muckraker" is now more often used to refer to one who "searches out and publicly exposes real or apparent misconduct of a prominent individual or business." With this more current definition in mind, Mitford was ultimately happy to accept the title "Queen of the Muckrakers."

Do you agree with Mitford's view that it is an honor to be called a "muckraker," or do you think that journalists who search out and expose real or apparent misconduct go too far in the pursuit of their stories? Explain your position in a well-written essay that uses specific evidence for support.

2006-A

From talk radio to television shows, from popular magazines to Web blogs, ordinary citizens, political figures, and entertainers express their opinions on a wide range of topics. Are these opinions worthwhile? Does the expression of such opinions foster democratic values? Write an essay in which you take a position on the value of such public statements of opinion, supporting your view with appropriate evidence.

2006-B

In many national elections, only a fraction of eligible voters actually casts ballots. For local elections, the voter turnout is often even smaller. To prevent this state of affairs, some countries, such as Australia, make voting compulsory for all adults. In a well-written essay that draws upon your reading, experience, or observations for support, take a position on the issue of compulsory voting.

2005-A

In "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," an article that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics, calls attention to the urgent need for food and medicine in many parts of the world. Singer argues that prosperous people should donate to overseas aid organizations such as UNICEF or Oxfam America all money not needed for the basic requirements of life: "The formula is simple: whatever money you're spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away." Write an essay in which you evaluate the pros and cons of Singer's argument. Use appropriate evidence as you examine each side, and indicate which position you find more persuasive.

2005-B (passage shortened)

The passage below is from *The Medusa and the Snail* by biologist Lewis Thomas. Read the passage carefully. Then, drawing on your own reading or experience, write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Thomas' claims.

Mistakes are at the very base of human thought, embedded there, feeding the structure like root nodules. If we were not provided with the knack of being wrong, we could never get anything useful done. We think our way along by choosing between right and wrong alternatives, and the wrong choices have to be made as frequently as the right ones. We get along in life this way. We are built to make mistakes, coded for error.

We learn, as we say, by "trial and error." Why do we always say that? Why not "trial and rightness" or "trial and triumph"? The old phrase puts it that way because that is, in real life, the way it is done.

2004-A

Contemporary life is marked by controversy. Choose a controversial local, national, or global issue with which you are familiar. Then, using appropriate evidence, write an essay that carefully considers the opposing positions on this controversy and proposes a solution.

2004-B

Michael Ignatieff, Professor of the practice of Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, made the following observation:

"To belong is to understand the tacit codes of the people you live with" --*Blood and Belonging*.

Consider how unspoken rules help to define group identity. Then write a carefully reasoned essay that examines the relationship between unspoken rules and belonging. Use specific examples to develop your position.

2003-A

In his 1998 book *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, Neal Gabler wrote the following:

One does not necessarily have to cluck in disapproval to admit that entertainment is all the things its detractors say it is: fun, effortless, sensational, mindless, formulaic, predictable and subversive. In fact, one might argue that those are the very reasons so many people love it.

At the same time, it is not hard to see why cultural aristocrats in the nineteenth century and intellectuals in the twentieth hated entertainment and why they predicted, as one typical nineteenth century critic railed, that its eventual effect would be "to overturn all morality, to poison the springs of domestic happiness, to dissolve the ties of our social order, and to involve our country in ruin.

Write a thoughtful and carefully constructed essay in which you use specific evidence to defend, challenge, or qualify the assertion that entertainment has the capacity to "ruin" society.

2003-B

The following passage comes from “The Common Life,” a 1994 essay by the American writer Scott Russell Sanders. Read the passage carefully and then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Sanders’ ideas about the relationship between the individual and society in the United States. Use specific evidence to support your position.

Every traveler knows the sense of liberation that comes from journeying to a place where nobody expects anything of you. Everyone who has gone to college knows the exhilaration of slipping away from the watchful eyes of Mom and Dad.

We all need seasons of withdrawal from responsibility. But if we make a career of being unaccountable, we have lost something essential to our humanity, and we may well become a burden or threat to those around us. . . . Taking part in the common life means dwelling in a web of relationships, the many threads tugging at you while also holding you upright. (passage shortened)

2002-A

Carefully read the following passage (shortened) from *Testaments Betrayed*, by the Czech writer Milan Kundera. Then write an essay in which you support, qualify, or dispute Kundera’s claim. Support your argument with appropriate evidence.

In private, a person says all sorts of things, slurs friends, uses coarse language, acts silly, tells dirty jokes, repeats himself, makes a companion laugh by shocking him with outrageous talk, floats heretical ideas he’d never admit in public, and so forth. Of course . . . in private, we (all) badmouth our friends and use coarse language; that we act different in private than in public is everyone’s most conspicuous experience; it is the very ground of the individual; curiously, this obvious fact remains unconscious, unacknowledged . . . it is rarely understood to be the value one must defend beyond all others. . . . Private and public are two essentially different worlds and . . . respect for that difference is the indispensable condition, the sine qua non, for a man to live free; that the curtain separating these two worlds is not to be tampered with, and that curtain-rippers are criminals.

2000

*Robes and furr’d gowns
hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy’s straw does pierce it.
-Shakespeare, King Lear*

The lines above are from a speech by King Lear. Write a carefully reasoned essay in which you briefly paraphrase Lear’s statement and then defend, challenge, or qualify his view of the relationship between wealth and justice. Support your argument with specific references to your reading, observation, or experience.

1999

In the following excerpt from *Antigone*, by the classical Greek playwright Sophocles, the wise Teiresias observes:

*Think: all men make mistakes,
But a good man yields when he
Knows his course is wrong,
And repairs the evil:
The only Crime is pride.*

Take some time to think about the implications of the quotation. Then write a carefully reasoned essay that explores the validity of the assertion, using examples from your reading, observation, or experience to develop your position.

1995

The paragraph below comes from a 1979 essay by expatriate African American writer James Baldwin. Read the paragraph carefully and then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Baldwin's ideas about the importance of language as a "key to identity" and to social acceptance. Use specific evidence from your observation, experience, or reading to develop your position.

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to "put your business in the street": You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and alas, your future.

1994

In *The March of Folly*, historian Barbara Tuchman writes:

Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists of assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts.

Some people would claim that what Tuchman calls wooden-headedness plays a remarkably large role in all organizations and, indeed, in all human affairs. Write a carefully reasoned persuasive essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies this idea about the prevalence of wooden-headedness in human actions and decisions. Use evidence from your reading and/or observation to develop your position.

1987

In the following passage, E. M. Forster argues that personal relations are more important than causes or patriotism. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay agreeing or disagreeing with Forster's view.

I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country. Such a choice may scandalize the modern reader, and he may stretch out his patriotic hand to the telephone at once and ring up the police. It would not have shocked Dante, though. Dante places Brutus and Cassius in the lowest circle of hell because they had chosen to betray their friend Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome.