The AP Persuasive Essay

Unlike the rhetorical analysis essay or the synthesis essay, you will have to develop all of your own evidence for this essay. You won’t have large chunks of text to work with. It will all come from you – from your reading, observations, and experiences.

The Persuasive Essay

- What it asks
  - Typically, the prompt asks you to do one of three things...

You may be asked to...

- Defend, challenge, or qualify a quotation about, or a particular take on, a specific topic.
In the Spectator for December 15, 1711, Joseph Addison wrote: If the talent of ridicule were employed to laugh men out of vice and folly, it might be of some use to the world; but instead of this, we find that it is generally made use of to laugh men out of virtue and good sense, by attacking everything that is solemn and serious, decent and praiseworthy in human life.

Write a carefully reasoned persuasive essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Addison’s assertion. Use appropriate evidence from your observation, experience, or reading to develop your position.

Defend, challenge, qualify

• So you will defend – agree with
• Challenge – disagree with
• Or qualify – both agree and disagree
  – It’s worth noting that few issues in the public square are cut and dried, so a “qualify” essay has the potential to be more sophisticated, though you ultimately have to present a strong point of view.
• There is no “right” position to take, except for the one for which you have the most evidence, and the most appropriate evidence.

You may be asked to...

• Take a position on whatever debatable statement is provided in the prompt.

Consider the distinct perspectives 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 Lyon Phelps, American educator, journalist, and professor (1865–1943)

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, British author, mathematician, and philosopher (1872–1970)

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

(2012, actual)
Take a position

• Don’t be wishy-washy.
• Obviously, this topic lends itself more to a “qualify” type of argument, but plan to fall more on one side than the other, and say so.

You may be asked to...

• Evaluate the pros and cons of an argument and then indicate why you find one position more persuasive than another

Such as...

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.

Evaluate pros and cons

• *Evaluate* means discuss the pros and cons critically, examine their validity.
• But note that you are ALSO asked to “indicate why you find one position more persuasive.” This should appear in your thesis.
And sometimes they ask you to...

• “Consider the extent” to which an argument holds true, which is a “qualify” argument.
  – The argument is true, but with caveats. What are they?
• “Examine the validity” of a statement or argument.
  – Another “qualify” argument — it is likely valid, but with caveats. OR, you can argue that it is not at all valid, assuming you have evidence.

Evidence

• You must do three things:
  – Understand the prompt and the nature of the position taken in it
  – Take a specific stand based upon the assertion in the prompt
  – Clearly and logically support your stand
    • You do this with EVIDENCE

Evidence

• Immediately brainstorm and list all that you know about the topic.
• Read the persuasive essay prompt first, then write the other essays while you think about the facts you can bring to your argument.

Evidence

• Facts/statistics
• Needed definitions
• Examples
• Anecdotes
• Cause and effect
• Appeal to authority
• Recognition of opposition
• Compare and contrast
### Evidence

- Places to find it
  - History
  - Current events
  - Science
  - Technology
  - Sports
  - Human behavior
  - Books you have read
    - Hint: Books you have read in your English classes can be a good source for anecdotes/evidence, though don’t overuse.

- Avoid using many personal anecdotes, and make them general, not overly personal
- Avoid using hypothetical situations (“If this happened, it might lead to this…”)
- Avoid using popular culture references (“On the TV show ‘The Bachelor’ …”)

### Tone and Style

- Generally, write in 3rd person, though a powerful and relevant personal anecdote can be included or can frame your essay beginning and end.
- Adopt an appropriate tone
- Use sophisticated phrasing

### 1st Paragraph

- Work the prompt, underline key words, be sure you know what you are being asked to do.
- Refer specifically to the prompt in the opening paragraph.
- Clearly state your position relative to the prompt.
Body Paragraphs

- What evidence will you use?
- How will you arrange or group it?
- Strive for 2 pieces of evidence per body paragraph
- Strive for 5 or more paragraphs total

Body Paragraph

- If your brain freezes, consider
  - One body paragraph using literary evidence
  - One body paragraph strongly connected to current affairs
  - One body paragraph with a personal story or historical references

Pitfalls

- Not reading the prompt closely enough to fully understand it
- Not taking a definite position
- Using inappropriate or weak evidence to support your position
- Overly focusing on the quote or passage in the prompt – slipping into rhetorical analysis rather than persuasive writing
- Over-reliance on pathos at the expense of ethos and, especially, logos.

Student Example

When Body Shop's founder, Sir Alan "Sir Alan" Reed, introduced his line of "muckrakers" to the market in 1972, it was revolutionary. In a move to compete with large, established companies, Reed's line of "muckrakers" was marketed as a more affordable alternative to traditional means of beauty. However, Reed faced criticism from both customers and competitors alike. Some argued that his line was not genuine, while others praised Reed's innovation. Regardless, Reed's line of "muckrakers" quickly became a staple in many households, demonstrating the power of innovation in the beauty industry.
Student Example

Tony Bennett wrote the phrase “positive” before President Johnson. He had been propagating the idea of “positive information” the American people in regard to the war. At that time, there was calling for the ending of the war. In this case, the president had given to the war report of what they were doing. His campaign ads were being negatively influenced by the war Negatives. Also, heavy propaganda spread across the nation. The president believed that the war was going well and Americans were breaching the Communist front. However, he failed to believe that this failed. He failed to believe that the war was actually a disaster and calling was being done about the war. However, the president failed to believe that the war was actually a disaster and calling was being done about the war.

Recap

- Work the prompt – understand what you are being asked to do
- Take a position
- Support your position with evidence