

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY- AP Lit.

I. UNDERSTAND THE PROMPT

Sounds too simple, doesn't it? But don't dismiss this first and most essential step.

Many essays have missed their marks because students failed to fully comprehend what the prompt demanded.

Divide the prompt into subsections, if necessary, and ask questions of each section.

SAMPLE PROMPT: *Discuss the novel's setting and show how the setting helps to communicate the novel's theme.*

- Divide into subsections: #1 novel's setting; #2 setting and theme.
- Ask questions: What is the novel's setting? How is the setting described? Why is the setting significant? Does the setting affect the characters? Does the setting change? If so, how does the change in setting affect the plot? What is the theme of the novel? How do the setting and theme relate to each other?

2. DEVELOP A THESIS

The thesis serves two purposes: (1) it is the main point of your essay; (2) it gives the reader your attitude or your point of view concerning the topic. (NOTE OF WARNING: unless the prompt indicates that it is safe to do so, do not write your essays in 1st or 2nd person. Keeping an objective third person voice in your essay is imperative.)

Your thesis must completely address all of the important aspects of the prompt in one sentence. Avoid simply restating the thesis. I call this mimicking the thesis. Such a practice makes it appear as if you have no imagination or creativity. If you, in fact, do not possess imagination or creativity, develop some immediately!

EXAMPLE

See prompt in #1 above.

Poor thesis: The novel's setting helps to communicate the theme.

Explanation: This thesis sounds too much like the prompt. How would you like to read many essays that all have the same unimaginative beginning? I wouldn't, and neither would the AP graders. HINT. HINT.

Good thesis: The dark, mysterious landscape of the largely unexplored interior of the African jungle serves to highlight Joseph Conrad's theme in *Heart of Darkness*.

Explanation: This thesis identifies the author, the title of the work, and it provides some specific information, rather than a vague repetition of the prompt

Better thesis: In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the dark, mysterious landscape of the largely unexplored interior of the African jungle mirrors Marlow's inner struggle to overcome his evil nature.

Explanation: This thesis is better than the other two because it states what the writer intends to say in the essay, and it provides the writer's opinion/point of view concerning the work being analyzed. The thesis does not directly identify the theme, but it does seem to suggest where the writer is headed with regards to his/her discussion of theme. *Notice that the third person, not first nor the second person, is being used.*

Best thesis: In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the dense, mysterious landscape of the largely unexplored interior of the African jungle represents the darkness in man's heart, a darkness that the protagonist, Marlow, and all people struggle to overcome.

Explanation: This thesis is, admittedly, wordy. Not all great theses need to be this long. In fact, the thesis would be a success if it had stopped after the phrase, "the darkness in man's heart." What makes this particular thesis strong is that it has all of the ingredients of the others and it specifically identifies the theme of the novel. *In class discussion; you will learn tricks of the trade that will allow you to write interesting theses and introduction paragraphs that will delight and impress your readers.*

3. SUPPORT YOUR THESIS

Your thesis is only the beginning. Now comes the hard part: Prove your point.

A lawyer may insist that his client is innocent, but until he/she produces irrefutable evidence the jury cannot make an informed decision. In a similar manner, you must go to the text and find proof that your thesis is credible.

Your primary evidence will be direct quotes (e.g. Kurtz whispered, "The horror! The horror!") and indirect quotes (e.g. Kurtz expressed horror at the thought of how far astray his original intentions had come.) The essay is only as good as the support you provide.

Consider the following questions when accumulating support:

WHEN? When does the support that you are using occur in the text? Providing context is vital. Your reader must know what was happening in the story during the point where the support you have chosen occurred. Keep your summary of the context brief. Don't tell more than is necessary to make your point clear. Essays filled with plot summary sink in the ocean of grades like a lead weight

- **WHAT?** What evidence is there to support your thesis. Here is where you will use a combination of direct and indirect quotes.

- **HOW? WHY?** How does the evidence support your thesis? Just because you say it doesn't make it so. Your essay may provide numerous examples, but if you don't carefully explain how those examples prove your point your grade will be disappointing. Why does the author use the particular examples that you choose to identify? Unfortunately, the author will not tell you why. You must use your advanced analysis skills to explain why.

4. PLAN YOUR ESSAY (OUTLINE)

Careful planning will probably help you avoid serious mistakes. Until I am confident you can organize your thoughts I may require an outline to be completed before you write your essay. In such a case, you will have to submit your outline with your essay.

5. USE YOUR NATURAL VOICE AND USE GOOD WRITING TECHNIQUES

Many students make the mistake of trying to write in an artificially stilted manner. These students try to impress the reader with vocabulary and style that is not natural to their specific personality. Although the essay should not be written in the same manner as an informal letter to your friend, neither should you try to exhaust the contents of your thesaurus.

Find a voice that fits your personality. Then focus on writing in a style that includes sentences of varying lengths and complexity.

Avoid mistakes in spelling, grammar, usage, punctuation, etc. The best essays will suffer if the writing mistakes are sufficient enough to distract the reader from the message being communicated