

## The English Language Exam: Developing an Argument

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### Returning to Daytona

Last spring, I went to Daytona Beach for my seventeenth consecutive year as a Reader of the AP English Language and Composition Exam. I keep going back because the Reading provides a rare opportunity to engage with college and high school colleagues in a rigorous professional task. We create and sustain a consensus on writing quality and apply it to over 400,000 student essays fairly, consistently, and quickly.

This year, I was assigned to read Question Three, which called for students to write an argument. The directive says: "Carefully read the following passage by Susan Sontag. Then write an essay in which you support, refute, or qualify Sontag's claim that photography limits our understanding of the world. Use appropriate evidence to develop your argument." There followed a provocative and somewhat cryptic three-paragraph excerpt from *On Photography*.

### Key to Success

Perhaps the single most important key to success on an AP Exam is the student's ability to see that the prompt identifies a task to be performed. Students who were successful on Question Three recognized key words in the prompt and were able to determine the task they were being asked to do.

### Claim and Argument

This question was not merely an invitation to write discursively on the subject of photography. The word "claim" in the prompt should have alerted students to the need for writing in argumentative form. This point was reinforced by the explicit mention of "argument" in the last sentence. The question requires that students understand what an argument is and know how to construct one.

### Support, Refute, or Qualify

The words "support, refute, or qualify" are technical terms that were not decoded in the question. Students need to know and need to have practiced these forms of argument during the term. (Some students misunderstood "qualify"; for example, "Sontag is not qualified to talk about photography.") In addition, these three words should signal to students that taking a position, even if a qualified one, is essential.

## Evidence and Develop

The word "evidence" is also important. Students need to know not only what constitutes evidence, but the difference between evidence and example. Even "develop" conveyed important signals -- their argument needed to move forward; they couldn't just make one little point and assume they were developing it by adding six redundant illustrations.

## Common Problems

Problems that prevented students from earning a high score on Question Three included:

Not taking a clear position or wavering between positions

Substituting a thesis-oriented expository essay for an argumentative essay

Being reluctant to engage in verbal combat because "everyone's entitled to his or her own opinion," so there's nothing to argue about

Slipping out of focus by discussing imagery in general

Trying to argue about photography by using evidence drawn from a literary reading list (for example, Othello, The Scarlet Letter) and sliding off topic into the theme of appearance and reality

Lacking clear connections between claims and the data, and the warrants needed to support them

Trying to analyze Sontag's rhetorical strategies or her style instead of arguing a point

## Some Suggestions for Teaching

When students did less well, the reasons often point toward the need for more direct instruction and practice in argumentative writing.

I recommend that teachers place an emphasis on:

Teaching students to read the prompt as part of their analysis of the rhetorical situation

Teaching students to analyze and compose for a wide variety of writing situations, not merely literary analysis

Using a variety of nonfiction prose for teaching composition and rhetoric