

# The CEA Forum

Winter/Spring 2007: 36.1

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PROFITS OVER PROCESS:

AP ENGLISH AND THE DECLINE OF WRITING INSTRUCTION

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“The next commission that comes down the pike will call for a standard of excellence that continues to keep America the greatest nation in the world. It's here; it's AP.” –Eric Rothschild (“AP Central: The Origins”)

“The easiest way to make a test ‘reliable’ is to make it crude. Instead of having students write a genuine essay, assign a 20-minute ‘free response.’ Instead of posing a genuine problem, ask a stupid question on a trivial topic. Instead of having graders make careful judgments, instruct them merely to skim.” –David Owen, *None of the Above: The Truth behind the SATs* (39)

These prefatory quotes accurately describe what has become two divergent schools of thought concerning the merits of the [Advanced Placement \(AP\) program](#) and its benefits for incoming college freshmen. Having celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2005, the AP program has received quite a bit of attention in the past few years due mainly to its exponential growth in popularity. While much of this attention has been positive, as the Rothschild quote attests, a significant amount of criticism has attacked the assumptions of the AP program (Owen being one of them), aligning it with all other standardized tests. These critics claim that the program cares more for their profits than the (writing) process, implying that test scores outweigh student learning. The AP program—which consists of both a course and culminating standardized exam—emphasizes test scores over everything else to the extent that student learning and development of writing skills are reduced in value, thus reducing a college education to a single test score. The implications of this devaluing of higher education

should both frighten as well as motivate those in the field of rhetoric and composition, as well as scholars in other academic disciplines.

The AP program, a high school course in which motivated students can work at the college level and receive credit for their efforts, has steadily increased in popularity since its inception in the 1950s. In 2005, 2.1 million students worldwide took an AP test ("AP Central: The Advanced"). This year, almost 90 percent of colleges and universities from all over the United States granted between 3 and 12 semester credits to incoming freshmen, based solely on qualified AP exam scores ("AP Central: The Advanced"). The prospect of receiving college credit for a small fee is the prime reason the AP program has gained in popularity. With college tuition increasing every year and job prospects decreasing in almost every field, parents and their students want to find a cheaper, easier shortcut to a college degree. To many families, AP is the answer to get their son or daughter ahead.

But as David Foster challenges, is the AP program an advantage for students? It benefits the Educational Testing Service (ETS), making it millions of dollars each year. It benefits universities, allowing them to give away the equivalent of scholarships without spending a dime. It benefits parents, allowing their son or daughter to receive free college credit, shortening their time to a diploma. But what about student learning? What kind of skills are learned in a course that prepares students to take a test, and are those skills representative of those taught in a real college course? Joining in the debate with Foster and other critics of AP, I believe that these programs end up being detrimental to a student's education, as the program and exam do not accurately train and measure student writing ability, leaving students unprepared for college-level writing. Furthermore, the practice of testing out of first-year writing programs perpetuates the myth that these courses inculcate "basic skills" and should be skipped over by bright, self-motivated AP students, stereotyping these introductory writing courses as unimportant and worthless to "intelligent" students. We as academics cannot ignore the severity of these claims, which reduce our work to no more than a dollar amount.

### **Adulations and Criticisms of Advanced Placement**

According to the official College Board website *AP Central*, the Advanced Placement program began in 1952 with a report from Harvard discussing the benefits of high schools working together with universities, naming them "two halves of a common enterprise" ("AP Central: The Origins"). Beginning in 1955 with 11 AP subject areas, the program has expanded to 20 areas as of 2006, with 35 different exams ("AP Central: The Advanced"). AP is now international in scope, with over one million students taking exams each year. While the College Board does note its success in terms of numbers, it also persuades in terms of benefits these courses provide. Citing the ways AP helps colleges and universities, the Board says that colleges which grant AP courses for college credit attract motivated students to apply. With the promise of free credit, AP students will want to attend those schools with an AP credit-granting policy. According to the Board, studies show that AP students are more motivated than the average student when they get to college, having been pushed hard their senior year to succeed in AP. The Board also says that granting AP credit will encourage students to pursue higher-division courses in that field ("AP Central: Setting").

However, for all the praise the AP program receives, criticism is not far behind. Some general arguments against the program deal with its teaching to a test, its inflated success rate, and the inadequacy of accurate measures of writing skills. In agreement with Foster's criticisms of the program, Daniel Mahala and Michael Vivion argue that the AP English exam is "an inappropriate way to assign college credit . . . the presumptions about language and rhetoric implicit in the exam are in many ways fundamentally at odds with those of our English I and II [introductory writing] courses" (254-256). Foster implies that AP's success rate (96% of test takers earn a passing score) isn't much of a surprise, considering it is located in the best, wealthiest schools and taken by the brightest students: "Good students can be trained to perform well in virtually any kind of writing situation, given enough rehearsal" (12). Of course the AP exam has a high pass rate, considering it is taken by the best students who have been prepared for it for the past nine months. The question Foster asks, however, ignores this impressive success rate: Are the skills emphasized in the AP English course and on the exam of value?

Furthermore, are they representative of the skills taught in those college courses for which AP students receive automatic credit? (Foster 12). Commenting on the high pass rate, James Vopat gives perhaps the harshest criticism of the program, stating that AP has “become a reward system that validates mediocrity” (“The Politics” 58). In 1981, Vopat wrote in *College English* decrying the program and publicly giving up his former AP exam essay reader role (“Going” 292). This is a highly charged issue, focusing on the potential benefits or possible harm the AP program provides. It receives both criticism and praise—but which does it deserve?

## The “Heart” of the Program: The AP Exam

The first and most obvious complaint expressed against Advanced Placement lies in the very nature of the program: the fact that the goal of the course is based upon preparation for an end-of-term exam. This product-oriented approach opposes the principles a composition course bases itself upon, whether at the high school or college level. Process theories are ignored in this program in favor of essentializing student learning down to a single test score. This emphasis takes away from student learning and reduces a college education down to a series of numbers.

As you might expect, the AP exam itself relies on numbers. In both the English Language and Composition and English Literature and Composition exams [1], there are two sections: multiple choice (worth 45% of the total score) and a free-response essay section (worth 55%) (College Entrance Examination Board). The multiple choice section contains two kinds of questions: reading comprehension and sentence manipulation. Reading comprehension asks questions based on a short passage of text, while sentence manipulation asks the student to pick the best improved structure of a selected sentence from among the four choices (Foster 6). The free-response section consists of three essays, which ask students to respond to a text for each of the first two prompts, and then ask the student to provide examples from their own reading to make an argument on a given topic for the third prompt, the open essay (McMullen 79).

Foster and other AP critics question the effectiveness of these exams, considering nearly half the test score on a composition exam comes from multiple choice questions. The sentence manipulation questions are actually detrimental to a student's concept of writing, as they rely on rearranging words and phrases and focus on an isolated, decontextualized sentence rather than considering texts holistically. It is ironic that the sentence manipulation questions, as they are written to test student ability, encourage a kind of unskilled revising behavior which focuses on proofreading and grammar instead of seeing the work as a whole. [2]

In addition, the essay section of the exam fares no better in testing student writing ability. For the exam, students are given three prompts and are asked to write three separate, complete essays on each prompt. The time recommended for each extends from 30 to 45 minutes. This is an incredibly short amount of time to go through the steps of the writing process—and indeed, in the AP exam, product is favored over process. What is most important is the resulting final draft—not the reflective process it might take to achieve the draft. Foster took a sample AP exam to test himself, and had the following experience during the essay portion:

These prewriting notes took me ten minutes to compose. Now I have barely half an hour to write the essay, and I have to use a pencil, not the word processor I usually write on. With so little writing time, I must follow the pattern my outline dictates and be careful to develop only enough examples to please the readers without deviating from my chosen organization. If I go on a tangent, I'm lost because I don't have time to explore it and to refocus or reshape my argument. My first thoughts freeze my thinking into a pattern I dare not abandon. I cannot revise. All that I have learned about composing evaporates as I watch the clock on the wall mark the waning minutes. (11)

This timed test ignores basic principles of composition theory, ignoring process and reflection in favor of an end product. Even White, in his essay “An Apologia for the Timed Impromptu Essay Test,” notes that a timed essay can be effective, but only in certain cases. High-stakes testing, like the AP exam, is not an appropriate venue to use the timed method, which is best reserved for entrance or placement testing. It is little wonder that Foster and other AP critics recommend the addition of a portfolio to the AP final exam score to better test a student's writing ability and knowledge of process.

Although the AP teacher guides recommend including process writing in the curriculum, the AP's idea of “process” is most often limited to focusing on the end product and its individual parts, such as structure, punctuation, vocabulary, and grammar. The AP Policy Guide notes that one of its main goals by the end of the AP English course is for students to have “stylistic maturity,” which is defined as having a large vocabulary, ability to vary sentence structure, having logical organization, keeping a balance between generalizations and illustrative details, and having a clear and appropriate tone and consistent voice. What this definition and list of goals lack is emphasis on purpose or audience. This is not surprising, considering the AP exam and course presumes the authority of the teacher or test reader, as the course's structure implies. The AP program assumes its essays are narrow in topic and form, and end up lacking in the current pedagogies which emphasize process-oriented, context-specific collaborative writing.

This product-oriented approach is detrimental to a student's improvement in writing. If a student views writing as a means to an end—as a grade-getter—and not as a process of learning and exploration, the student risks stagnation, and trivializes writing in the process. As Bronwyn T. Williams points out in a recent essay, treating student writing as authentic and important is vital to improvement in writing ability. Williams notes that Nancy Sommers, in a 2005 study of teacher responses to student writing, found that the largest improvement in writing ability came when teachers took students' writing seriously, using constructive criticism to look for ways students could improve their drafts. Allowing the students to see individual, human responses to their writing (in the form of teacher comments), “not only helps students become better writers, it also helps them create their identities as writers” (Williams 156). Unfortunately, this seems to be the antithesis of the AP program. Caring more about numbers and credit hours, the product-oriented exam does nothing to test student literacy, and in fact the program reduces student achievement in writing by basing their goals on these profit-motivated assumptions.

By reducing all knowledge to things that can be answered by “A,” “B,” “C,” or “D,” what message are we sending our students? What beliefs will former AP students most likely hold about English studies: that of a critical, writing-intensive exploratory process, or that of a single test score? In the recent *English Journal* article “Speaking My Mind: Hidden Dangers of the AP English Exams,” high school teacher Jeffrey C. Markham cites a sample question from the exam to argue his criticism of the program. He notes that the question “How did Queen Elizabeth's rhetorical style make her speech effective?” asks little of students. The answer requires no more than basic identification of rhetorical terms and style issues. From answering this question, students “may do well on the AP exam but will have gained little from the experience” (Markham 18). This question does not ask students to read closely or critically analyze her rhetorical style, but merely asks them to identify and summarize—both low-level skills that may be fine for a high school course, but inappropriate for the college level. Markham suggests amending the question: “the rest of the question should sound something like, ‘Do you think the basic premises are true, and if they are true, what of them?’ Unless we ask the last two questions, students remain trapped in an academic exercise that is ultimately useless to personal growth” (Markham 19). This gets at the heart of AP criticism—that an objective test does not challenge students enough to accurately assess their English skills. After going through the experience of scoring AP essay exams, high school teacher Jeffrey Schwartz agrees with Markham, arguing that the essay exam does not assess a student's writing process, and by implication does not value it. Schwartz comments that “writing on standardized tests is not an authentic assessment of the complex tasks we ask of students. . . .The AP exam can test some [processes] but not the full extent of processes we expect from our most thoughtful and accomplished students” (55). Markham states that AP's assumption of a single, correct answer, whether on multiple choice questions or from a literary analysis essay, is “fundamentally at odds with our teaching” (19). These assumptions can lead to misinterpretation of what English is all about. Advanced Placement's emphasis on that single answer and its

resulting numerical score confuse students into thinking that English is a matter of choosing “A,” “B,” “C,” or “D,” and has nothing to do with process or critical thinking.

### “First, Remember to Print”: The Scoring Issue

The lack of preparation for college-level work is a major complaint of AP's critics. They question whether a standardized test can truly measure student ability and readiness for college. Not only this, but is the credit granted AP test-takers even warranted? Many accuse the program of overly-lenient scoring. Even recent AP test-prep guides evidence the problems of the scoring system. McMullen, in his introductory section to the chapter on the essay portion of the AP exam, states “we aren't going to try to teach you how to write well, not even a little. We are going to teach you how to write a high-scoring AP essay.” His recommendations? First, remember to print. Clear handwriting will receive better scores. Next, indent paragraphs. Otherwise, the reader may get confused as to the essay's organization and mark a student lower. Write the first two sentences of every paragraph perfectly (meaning, use correct spelling and grammar), as readers will focus mostly on those sentences and only skim the rest of the document. Another recommendation is to use “snappy verbs and tasty nouns” to impress and entertain the test reader. Finally, a side note is to remember to answer the question (82-87). This complete abandonment of the writing process or any kind of composition theory demonstrates not only how ineffective these essay tests are in measuring writing ability, but also shows the leniency of the AP scoring system.

As Owen admits in his exposé on standardized testing *None of the Above*, high scores on the AP exam are good for everyone. Colleges like them because they can recruit top-notch students without having to spend money. Parents like them because they save on college tuition. The Educational Testing Service and its College Board like them because they get millions of dollars a year in revenue. Therefore, there is no real pressure on AP test graders to score essays very harshly, resulting in frequent accusations by AP critics of score inflation (Owen 36). In addition, this score inflation is actually predetermined—the College Board promotes its AP exam as having a consistent 96% pass rate (which includes scores from 2, “possible qualification,” to 5, “highly qualified”)—every single year. [3] They also brag that more than 67% of test takers receive at least some college credit every year. The only way the Board can make these statements of consistency is to require the pass rate to stay at 96% *before* any test is ever graded (Lichten; Mahala and Vivion 254).

This consistent pass rate, while impressive on the College Board's website and very persuasive in convincing students to take the test, has resulted in problems between ETS and universities around the issue of granting credit. Lichten explains the flaw in the AP's consistent 96% passing rate in his essay “Whither Advanced Placement?” by stating that while the pass rate remains stable, the numbers of student test-takers increase dramatically every year (a statistic of which the College Board is quite proud). Chances are that with the increase of AP programs and test takers, the quality of programs and students will statistically average lower, making a score of 3 on the exam taken in 2005 mean less than that same score from 1985. To keep up with the high pass rate, graders are forced to grade more leniently, which makes AP critics question the worth of those scores. This issue has made many universities question AP scores as well, forcing them to toughen standards of granting credit—and at some universities, only placement, not credit, is granted. This issue of scoring threatens the very purpose of the Advanced Placement program and must be addressed by ETS and the College Board if they intend to gain the respect of higher education institutions.

Many critics claim, like Lichten, that the rapid increase in AP courses being offered in high schools causes the course itself to be “water[ed] down” (Welsh). Speaking of the pass rate in 1978 (at 96% even then), James Vopat warns that this astronomical rate is “disturb[ing]” and “hear[s] in them the echo of the profession's death knell” (“Going”). Patrick Welsh, a high school English teacher, notes the trend and its incredible boost in enrollment, stating that AP test takers increased by 38% percent between 2000 and 2004. The number of AP-participating schools increased by 417 institutions in a single year, from 2003 to 2004. Welsh is suspicious of these impressive statistics, noting that at his high school, AP English has increased from eight sections in 2004

to eleven in 2005, “defining about half the senior class as ‘advanced.’” This, he notes, is quite unlikely: “Is this year's senior class so superior to last year's that three new sections had to be added? Hardly.” Due to this rapid increase, Welsh shares his concern with Lichten about the consistency of the AP program. With statistics like these, it is easy for credit-granting institutions to be suspicious at the worth of an AP score, leading to tougher policies in granting college credit or placement.

The most harmful aspect of the AP program's problems is not that the course and exam fail to test appropriate writing skills, or even that an overwhelming number of students get at least a satisfactory score. The worst part of AP's failures impacts each student's future education, through granting AP exam credit for university-level courses. This is the main problem—if the AP exam doesn't test writing skills, that is one issue. But it's completely different—and much more harmful to students—if that AP test-that-doesn't-test is assumed by most universities to be the equivalent of a freshman composition course. It is quite unfortunate, in fact, that the “best and brightest” who enroll in AP end up not practicing their writing skills and even are allowed to skip that composition course their first year in college, thus hurting themselves and limiting their own possibilities for growth as writers. The fact that AP not only impacts students' senior year education but also heavily alters their college career is something we as educators cannot ignore.

### **Testing Out: The AP's Trivialized View of Composition**

Joseph Jones notes in his essay “Recomposing the AP English Exam” that many former AP students had skewed outlooks on writing and themselves as writers. He cites Spear and Flesher's study that found students “needed to overcome the message of the AP course that they were finished developing as writers—a message that the decisiveness of the AP exam and subsequent waivers from college writing requirements unfortunately reinforce” (51). In AP's emphasis on the product and glorification of the text, the program ignores the recursive process of writing and the continual development of students as writers. With the ending of the course and the taking of the exam, students often believe that's it for their writing skills—they'll always write in the way they did on the exam. This lack of process and reflection is perhaps what is most detrimental to students. The AP program may offer great things, but the lifelong learning a student misses is enormous. The narrow view the program keeps concerning writing and reading texts is detrimental to a student's future development as a writer and critical thinker.

Many students take the AP exam in order to test out of beginning composition classes—considered undesirable by many students. The AP program implies this belief as well, when they refer to beginning English courses as teaching “basic skills” which should be gotten out of the way as soon as possible, preferably before even coming to college (Jones 53). Mahala and Vivion criticize AP's implicit trivialization of composition courses in their article, saying “students are understanding undergrad ‘English’ as one of the easiest subjects to ‘test out of’ in the university. . . which leads to [a] trivialized view of writing” (255). Ironically, the exam doesn't even accurately measure the writing ability it trivializes. Jones admits the exam does test critical thinking and close reading skills well, but these are certainly not the only English skills students need (54). Jones goes on to say that “there are few, if any, college freshman English courses centered around either a student's ability to correctly answer multiple choice questions or a student's ability to write a series of timed, impromptu essays” (55). This exam that grants composition course credit does not accurately measure writing ability—and in fact inhibits it: “If we want to test writing ability, and if we understand writing ability to include the ability to revise and rethink a paper (by consulting secondary sources, talking with others, etc.), AP prohibits such engagement. Therefore the authenticity of the measurement must be questioned” (Jones 55).

It should be noted that AP has taken steps to align its course and exam with first-year composition. Beginning in 2006 with the English Language and Composition course, further emphasis on research writing and synthesis, as well as rhetorical analysis, will be added to its recommended course goals (“AP Central: Changes”). In 2007, a synthesis essay will be required as one of three essays on the exam. This will ask students to use three to four given sources to support their position on an argument. To accommodate the extra reading required, fifteen

minutes will be added to the essay portion time limit. The multiple choice section will also include questions about documentation. While this does improve the validity of the measurement, it is still a very minimal change. At issue here is much more than the content of the course or exam—it is its implied values. Still, AP focuses on an end-of-term exam, asking students to demonstrate writing skills with little regard to process. No matter the change in content, AP's values—that of commercial profit—remain the same.

What should we take away from this? Clearly, AP is detrimental to student learning and writing ability. It only serves to hinder student learning, instead providing an easy pass to quick credit and an accelerated path to a diploma. We as academics need to be aware of this trend, which is slowly taking over the mind set of our colleges and universities, reducing our jobs to dollar figures. The AP program is not all that it claims: the flaws in its coursework, exam methods, and scoring are too serious for any student, parent, or academic to ignore. Vopat, a former AP exam essay reader, confesses in his conclusion to his 1981 *College English* article that he cannot score the essays anymore, as it goes against his teaching philosophy:

I really cannot justify being part of a process which tells these students they are (to different degrees) “qualified.” I think the economic and political implications of what happens each year [during the exam scoring time] forebode a future educational system I really want to live without. APE [Advanced Placement Examination] may, indeed, have started out back in 1956 as a glorious dream. But in my experience, the process has become something very different. (“Going” 292)

That was in 1981. Now, in 2006, what has changed? Lichten may not be too far off in his projection that soon, due to the numerous problems of the program, colleges and universities may be better off refusing to grant AP credit. Most importantly, the product-oriented (and profit-obsessed) assumptions that guide Advanced Placement still emphasize quantity (in scores) over quality (of education, of critical thinking, of improvement or development in writing skills). Does AP mean the end of the university as we know it? Currently, the program's popularity and misinformation it spreads to students and families about the value (i.e., in dollar amounts, rather than in educational value) of a college education threatens our future. In any case, both the university and the AP program need to carefully rethink their values if either intend to last into the next century.

## Notes

[1] Although there are two different AP English exams, their structure and purpose are essentially the same. In fact, the only apparent difference between the two is the type of text the exam asks students to analyze: English Literature and Composition asks students to look at fiction and poetry texts, and the English Language and Composition focuses on nonfiction samples exclusively (Jones 55). Douglas McMullen, in his AP test prep guide, notes the difference between the two exams. He recommends that if a student hates poetry, he or she should choose to take the Language and Composition test (10). While these tests and the assumptions behind them are the same, attitudes around them expose the program's values. McMullen's rather snide remark is a good example of the assumed differences between the tests. In the AP program, literature and literary studies rank highest, and composition is brushed to the side. This is also evident in another AP English test-prep guide by Laurie Rozakis, where it defines the Language and Composition test in terms of lack: “[the test is] for students who have attained the reading and writing skills generally expected at the end of the freshman year of college but who may not have studied literary analysis” (viii). All that is stated about the Literature and Composition test is that the test is “for students trained in literary analysis,” as if there were no higher goal (viii). ([back to text](#))

[2] In fact, the biggest difference found between skilled writers and unskilled ones is just that—the unskilled

writers are unable to see revision as a process, and prefer to revise by changing bits of sentences and little punctuation errors (Foster 7). ([back to text](#))

[3] This is especially interesting, since in 1980 a number of colleges and universities measured the validity of the AP Language and Composition exam by giving parts of the official exam to their first-year composition students. They estimated that these students—even though the majority were currently receiving B's or C's in their English course—would earn scores of 2 or 3 (27% and 39%, respectively). Only 16% would receive a 4 and 13% a 5, the highest possible score. This indicates potential severe problems in the AP grading system, both past and present, as the 96% pass rate (3 or above) has been consistent since its inception (Modu and Wimmers). ([back to text](#))

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