
AP EXAM REVIEW

How to Tackle Free Response Questions

Multi-Subject Pack

AP U.S. History • AP English Language • AP Psychology • AP Environmental Science

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UM Printables

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General FRQ Strategy & Timing Overview

Free Response Questions (FRQs) are the section of AP exams where students demonstrate deep understanding through written responses. Unlike multiple-choice questions, FRQs require you to construct arguments, apply concepts, analyze evidence, and communicate clearly. Regardless of the subject, the following universal strategies will strengthen your FRQ performance.

Universal FRQ Strategies

- 1. Read the prompt carefully.** Underline the command word (evaluate, analyze, explain, describe, compare) and circle the scope (time period, topic, context). Misreading the prompt is the most common reason students lose points.
- 2. Plan before you write.** Spend 3–5 minutes outlining your response. A brief outline ensures logical structure and prevents you from forgetting key points mid-paragraph.
- 3. Address every part of the prompt.** Many FRQs have multiple components. Label your responses (A, B, C) to ensure no part is left unanswered.
- 4. Be specific and concrete.** Vague statements earn no points. Use specific terms, dates, names, concepts, and examples. “The New Deal expanded federal power” is weak; “The Social Security Act of 1935 established a federal safety net for the elderly and unemployed, significantly expanding the role of the federal government in economic security” is strong.
- 5. Use subject-specific vocabulary.** Each discipline has key terminology. Using precise language demonstrates mastery and often aligns directly with rubric criteria.
- 6. Manage your time.** Allocate time per question and stick to it. A partially completed response to every question will earn more points than one perfect response and two blank ones.
- 7. Write legibly and organize clearly.** Use paragraphs, topic sentences, and transitions. If graders cannot read or follow your response, they cannot award points.

■ **Strategy Tip:** The ‘command word’ in a prompt tells you exactly what cognitive task is required. ‘Describe’ means tell what happened; ‘explain’ means tell why or how; ‘evaluate’ means make a judgment about extent or significance; ‘compare’ means discuss both similarities and differences.

Common FRQ Command Words

Component	Points	Description
Command Word	1	What It Requires
Identify/State		Provide a specific answer without elaboration
Describe		Provide the characteristics or details of a concept or event
Explain		Describe AND provide reasons or causes; address “how” or “why”
Compare		Discuss both similarities AND differences between two or more items

Component	Points	Description
Evaluate		Make a judgment about the extent, significance, or effectiveness of something
Analyze		Break down a topic into its component parts and explain their relationships
Argue		Take a clear position and support it with evidence and reasoning

Cross-Subject Timing at a Glance

Subject	Component	Time / Strategy
AP U.S. History	DBQ: 60 min	15 min reading + 45 min writing
	LEQ: 40 min	5 min planning + 35 min writing
	SAQ: 40 min	~13 min per question (3 total)
AP English Language	Synthesis: 60 min	15 min reading + 45 min writing
	Rhet. Analysis: 40 min	5 min reading + 35 min writing
	Argument: 40 min	5 min planning + 35 min writing
AP Psychology	FRQ 1: 25 min	5 min reading + 20 min writing
	FRQ 2: 45 min	5 min reading + 40 min writing
AP Env. Science	FRQ 1: 23 min	Document-based question
	FRQ 2: 23 min	Data-set analysis question
	FRQ 3: 24 min	Analysis & evaluation question

■ **Key Takeaway:** No matter the subject, the formula for FRQ success is: **Understand the Prompt** → **Plan Your Response** → **Write with Specificity** → **Proofread for Completeness**. Every rubric point is earned through precise, relevant, and well-organized content.

AP U.S. History

DBQ • LEQ • SAQ Strategies & Practice

AP U.S. History — FRQ Strategy Guide

The APUSH exam includes three types of free response questions: the Document-Based Question (DBQ), the Long Essay Question (LEQ), and the Short Answer Questions (SAQs). Each requires distinct skills, but all reward historical thinking: argumentation, use of evidence, contextualization, and complex reasoning.

A. Document-Based Question (DBQ) — 60 Minutes

The DBQ presents 7 historical documents and requires you to construct an argument that synthesizes document evidence with your own outside knowledge. You must use at least 6 documents to earn full evidence credit, but the best essays also bring in outside evidence beyond the documents.

DBQ Step-by-Step Strategy:

- 1. Read the prompt first** (1 min). Identify the task (evaluate the extent, compare, explain causes) and the scope (time period, theme).
- 2. Read and annotate the documents** (12 min). For each document, note: main idea, author's point of view, intended audience, purpose, and historical context (HIPP).
- 3. Group documents** (2 min). Organize documents into 2–3 thematic groups that support different aspects of your argument.
- 4. Write your thesis** (2 min). Your thesis must directly answer the prompt with a clear, defensible claim that outlines your argument structure.
- 5. Write your essay** (40 min). Include contextualization in your intro, use evidence from documents AND outside knowledge, and demonstrate sourcing analysis for at least 2 documents.
- 6. Proofread** (3 min). Check that every body paragraph connects back to your thesis and that you've addressed the prompt fully.

■ **Strategy Tip:** For the DBQ, you must demonstrate 'complex understanding' to earn the final Analysis & Reasoning point. Show complexity by: (a) explaining multiple causes/effects, (b) noting continuity AND change, (c) acknowledging counterarguments, or (d) connecting different historical themes.

■ **Common Pitfall:** Don't simply summarize or quote documents. You must **use** documents as evidence to support a specific argument. A document summary without analysis earns no evidence points.

B. Long Essay Question (LEQ) — 40 Minutes

The LEQ requires you to construct an argument using only your own historical knowledge—no documents are provided. You choose between two prompts spanning different time periods or themes.

LEQ Step-by-Step Strategy:

- 1. Choose your prompt** (1 min). Pick the one where you have the most specific evidence.

■ **Key Takeaway:** SAQ success depends on **specificity**. Every answer should include at least one concrete, accurate historical detail—a name, a date, a law, an event, or a specific example. Vague statements like ‘things got better’ or ‘they faced discrimination’ do not earn points without supporting specifics.

AP English Language

Synthesis • Rhetorical Analysis • Argument Strategies & Practice

AP English Language — FRQ Strategy Guide

The AP English Language and Composition exam features three distinct free response questions: the Synthesis Essay, the Rhetorical Analysis Essay, and the Argument Essay. Each requires persuasive writing, but they differ in the type of evidence you use and the analytical task required.

A. Synthesis Essay (FRQ 1) — 55 Minutes Total

The Synthesis Essay provides 6–7 sources (texts, images, data) on a specific issue. You must construct an argument that incorporates evidence from at least 3 sources. Think of it as a researched argument: you are using provided sources to build and support your position.

Synthesis Step-by-Step Strategy:

1. **Read the prompt first** (1 min). Identify the issue and determine your exact task: defend, challenge, or qualify a claim, or develop a position on the issue.
2. **Read and annotate the sources** (12 min). For each source, note: main idea, author's perspective, and how it might support or challenge your potential position. Label sources as 'for,' 'against,' or 'nuanced.'
3. **Formulate your thesis** (2 min). Your thesis must clearly state your position and establish your line of reasoning.
4. **Draft your essay** (38 min). Integrate at least 3 sources. Don't just summarize sources—use them as evidence to support your argument. Address at least one counterargument or alternate perspective.
5. **Proofread** (2 min). Ensure every source you cite is properly attributed and that your argument is consistent.

■ **Strategy Tip:** A high-scoring synthesis essay does not merely string together source summaries. It uses sources as **evidence in service of the writer's own argument**. Introduce the source, state the evidence, and then **comment on how it supports your reasoning**.

B. Rhetorical Analysis Essay (FRQ 2) — 40 Minutes Total

The Rhetorical Analysis Essay presents a nonfiction text and asks you to analyze the writer's rhetorical choices—how the writer uses language to achieve a specific purpose for a specific audience. You are not agreeing or disagreeing with the writer; you are explaining *how* the argument is constructed.

Rhetorical Analysis Step-by-Step Strategy:

1. **Read the prompt** (1 min). Identify the writer, the text's purpose, and the audience.
2. **Read the text closely** (6 min). Annotate for rhetorical choices: diction, syntax, imagery, tone, appeals (ethos, pathos, logos), structure, and figurative language.
3. **Formulate your thesis** (2 min). Your thesis should state the writer's purpose and identify 2–3 rhetorical choices that contribute to achieving that purpose.
4. **Draft your essay** (28 min). Organize by rhetorical choice or by the text's structure. Each body paragraph should: identify a choice, provide a specific quote or reference, and explain how that choice affects the audience and advances the writer's purpose.

➤ **THESIS ✓**: The thesis makes a defensible claim (civil disobedience is important) with a basic line of reasoning (unfair laws require protest for change). It earns the point.

One example of civil disobedience is when Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat on the bus. This started the Civil Rights Movement and helped end segregation. Another example is when people protest against unfair laws today by marching in the streets. These protests show the government that the people are not happy and want things to change.

➤ **EVIDENCE & COMMENTARY ✓ (partial)**: Provides one specific example (Rosa Parks) and one generic example (marching in the streets). Earns 2 points for evidence. The commentary is minimal ("helped end segregation," "show the government that people are not happy") and does not explain how civil disobedience functions within a democratic society or why it is effective. No commentary or consistency points earned.

Some people think civil disobedience is bad because it breaks the law, but sometimes you have to break the law to make things better.

➤ **The counterargument is mentioned but not developed. No sophistication.**

Score Breakdown:

- Thesis: 1/1 ✓
- Evidence & Commentary: 2/4 ✓ (Provides one specific and one general example, but commentary is thin)
- Sophistication: 0/1 ✗

Total: 3/6

■ **Key Takeaway:** For the Argument essay, **specificity and commentary** are what separate a 3/6 from a 5/6. Naming Rosa Parks is a start; explaining that her act of civil disobedience exposed the gap between democratic ideals and segregationist reality—and that the resulting boycott forced political change through economic pressure—is what earns full credit.

AP Psychology

Concept Application • Research Design Strategies & Practice

AP Psychology — FRQ Strategy Guide

The AP Psychology exam includes two types of free response questions: the Concept Application question and the Research Methodology and Design question. Unlike many other AP exams, AP Psychology FRQs are not traditional essays. They are structured sets of discrete tasks that require you to identify, define, and apply psychological concepts to a specific scenario.

A. Concept Application Question

This question presents a detailed scenario and lists 6–7 psychological concepts. You must define each concept and explain how it applies to the scenario. Each part is typically worth 1 point for a correct definition and application, for a total of 7 points.

Concept Application Step-by-Step Strategy:

1. **Read the entire scenario first** (2 min). Do not look at the concepts yet. Underline key details, character names, behaviors, and situational factors.
2. **Read the concepts** (1 min). Mentally define each term before writing to ensure you understand it correctly.
3. **Write your response** (18 min). For each concept, follow the A-B-C format: **A**ssign the term to the scenario, **B**ecause (provide the definition), **C**ontext (connect it to the specific detail in the scenario).
4. **Review for specificity** (4 min). Ensure every application references a specific character, action, or detail from the scenario—not a generic example.

■ **Strategy Tip:** Use the 'A-B-C Method' for every concept application: **A**ssign ("In the scenario, Maya demonstrates [concept]"), **B**ecause ("which is defined as [definition]"), **C**ontext ("as seen when she [specific action from the scenario]"). This guarantees you earn both the definition and application points.

■ **Common Pitfall:** The most common mistake on the Concept Application FRQ is providing a correct definition but a generic application (e.g., "Maya uses chunking to remember things"). You must connect the term to a **specific detail** from the scenario (e.g., "Maya uses chunking by grouping the ten digits of her new locker combination into three smaller sets: 12-345-67").

B. Research Methodology and Design Question

This question describes a research study and asks you to identify variables, apply research methodology terms, interpret data, or identify design flaws. It tests your understanding of how psychological research is conducted and evaluated.

Research Design Step-by-Step Strategy:

1. **Read the study description carefully** (3 min). Identify the hypothesis, the independent variable (IV), the dependent variable (DV), the sample, and the procedure.
2. **Analyze the design** (2 min). Is it experimental or correlational? Are participants randomly assigned? Are there potential confounding variables?

The exhaustion stage of GAS is when your body gets tired from being stressed out for a long time. Jamal is getting headaches and high blood pressure because he's been so stressed at work.

► **DEFINITION ✓ (partial) + APPLICATION ✓:** *The definition is informal but captures the key idea (body gets tired from prolonged stress). The application correctly connects the stress to the specific physical symptoms. Earns 1 point.*

D.

Approach-avoidance conflict is when you want to approach something good and avoid something bad. Jamal wants the promotion because of the money but doesn't want the extra hours.

► **DEFINITION ✓ (partial) + APPLICATION ✓:** *The definition describes the basic idea but does not specify that it is a single goal with both positive and negative aspects. The application correctly identifies the desirable and undesirable aspects. Earns 1 point.*

E.

The HPA axis is the part of the brain that controls stress. When Jamal is stressed, his HPA axis makes him feel anxious.

► **DEFINITION ✗ + APPLICATION ✗:** *The HPA axis is not a 'part of the brain'—it is a neuroendocrine system involving the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and adrenal glands. The application mentions stress but does not connect it to cortisol release or physical symptoms. No point earned.*

Score Breakdown:

- A. Cognitive dissonance: 0/1 ✗ (inaccurate definition)
- B. Foot-in-the-door: 0/1 ✗ (reversed definition)
- C. GAS (exhaustion): 1/1 ✓ (informal but accurate)
- D. Approach-avoidance: 1/1 ✓ (partial but acceptable)
- E. HPA axis: 0/1 ✗ (inaccurate definition)

Total: 2/5

■ **Strategy Tip:** *When studying for AP Psychology FRQs, focus on **precise definitions**. Many terms sound similar to everyday language (e.g., cognitive dissonance, foot-in-the-door), but the colloquial use often differs from the psychological definition. Always study the formal definition and practice writing it out before applying it.*

AP Environmental Science

Document-Based • Data Analysis • Synthesis & Evaluation Strategies & Practice

AP Environmental Science — FRQ Strategy Guide

The AP Environmental Science exam includes three Free Response Questions, each worth 10 points, for a total of 30 points. The FRQ section accounts for 40% of your exam score. The three questions are: a Document-Based Question (FRQ 1), a Data Set Analysis Question (FRQ 2), and a Synthesis and Evaluation Question (FRQ 3). APES FRQs often include calculations, and partial credit is available if you show your work.

A. Document-Based Question (FRQ 1) — 23 Minutes

This question provides an article, report, or scenario about an environmental issue. You must identify environmental problems, propose solutions, and explain environmental concepts related to the scenario. It often includes a calculation.

Document-Based Step-by-Step Strategy:

1. **Read the entire document/scenario first** (3 min). Identify the core environmental issue, the stakeholders, and any data or numbers provided.
2. **Read the prompts** (1 min). Note which parts require identification, which require explanation, and which require calculation.
3. **Write your responses** (17 min). Answer each sub-question directly. For calculations, always show your setup and include units.
4. **Review** (2 min). Check that every part is answered and calculations have units.

■ **Strategy Tip:** In APES, you earn points for **showing your work** on calculations. Even if your final answer is wrong, you can earn a point for the correct setup. Always write the formula, plug in the numbers, and then provide the final answer with correct units (e.g., ppm, mg/L, hectares).

B. Data Set Analysis Question (FRQ 2) — 23 Minutes

This question presents a graph, table, or chart. You must describe trends, interpret data, perform calculations (such as percent change or rate), and explain the environmental concepts behind the data.

Data Analysis Step-by-Step Strategy:

1. **Analyze the data representation** (4 min). Read the title, axes, legends, and units. Identify the overall trend (increasing, decreasing, fluctuating) and any notable data points (maximums, minimums, intersections).
2. **Write your responses** (17 min). When describing a trend, use specific data points (e.g., “The concentration decreased from 80 ppm in 1990 to 20 ppm in 2010”). For calculations, show all work.
3. **Review** (2 min). Ensure all data descriptions reference specific numbers and that explanations connect back to the data.

The government should make a law that says companies have to use renewable energy.

► **PROPOSAL X + EXPLANATION X:** *The proposal is vague ('make a law') and does not explain how the law would work or encourage adoption (e.g., a renewable portfolio standard requiring a specific percentage of electricity from renewables by a certain date). No points earned.*

Score Breakdown:

- A. Benefit of natural gas: 0/1 X (vague)
- B. Problem with fracking: 1/1 ✓
- C. Identify renewable: 1/1 ✓
- D. Advantage & disadvantage: 2/2 ✓
- E. Economic challenge: 0/1 X (vague)
- F. Government policy: 0/2 X (vague proposal, no explanation)

Total: 4/8

■ **Strategy Tip:** *When proposing government policies in APES, be specific about the **type** of policy and **how** it works. 'Make a law' is too vague. Instead, specify: 'Implement a carbon tax that charges companies \$X per ton of CO₂ emitted, making fossil fuels more expensive and renewables more competitive.' This shows the grader you understand both the policy and its economic mechanism.*

Teacher Facilitation Notes

This resource is designed to be flexible and adaptable for various instructional settings. Whether you are using it for whole-class instruction, small group workshops, or individual student test prep, the following facilitation notes will help you maximize its effectiveness.

How to Use This Resource

- 1. Diagnostic Pre-Assessment.** Before diving into the strategy guides, have students attempt one practice prompt cold. Use the scored sample responses to show them what a high-scoring vs. medium-scoring response looks like, establishing a baseline for growth.
- 2. Teach the Strategy First.** Walk students through the subject-specific strategy guides. Model the step-by-step process (e.g., the A-B-C method for AP Psych, HIPP analysis for APUSH DBQs) before asking them to practice independently.
- 3. Guided Practice with Rubrics.** Have students complete a practice prompt and then self-score using the rubric breakdown provided. Next, have them compare their response to the scored samples. This metacognitive exercise is one of the most effective ways to improve FRQ performance.
- 4. Peer Review.** Use the scored samples as answer keys for peer review sessions. Have students swap responses and score each other's work using the rubric. Scoring another student's work deepens understanding of what the rubric rewards.
- 5. Timed Practice.** Once students are comfortable with the strategies and rubrics, conduct timed practice sessions using the recommended timing in each section. Building time-management muscle is essential for exam day.

■ **Strategy Tip:** Encourage students to annotate the scored sample responses. Have them highlight the thesis, underline evidence, and circle commentary/analysis. This visual decomposition helps students see the architecture of a successful FRQ response.

Subject-Specific Facilitation Tips

AP U.S. History:

- **DBQ Grouping Activity:** Before students write the DBQ, have them group the 7 documents into 2–3 thematic categories on their own. Discuss different grouping options as a class to show that multiple valid arguments can emerge from the same documents.
- **HIPP Drill:** Project a single document on the board and give students 3 minutes to write a sourcing statement (Historical context, Intended audience, Purpose, Point of view). Share and critique as a class.
- **Complexity Challenge:** Ask students to take a medium-scoring LEQ sample and revise it to earn the complexity point. This requires them to practice acknowledging counterarguments or demonstrating continuity AND change.

AP English Language:

- **Commentary Workshop:** Give students a piece of evidence (e.g., a quote from a source) and have them write three different commentary statements for it, each supporting a different line of reasoning. This builds flexibility in thinking.
- **Rhetorical Analysis Slow-Reading:** Before writing the rhetorical analysis essay, have students spend 10 minutes annotating the text for specific rhetorical choices. Collect annotations and provide feedback before they draft.
- **Thesis Triage:** Display 5 sample thesis statements (ranging from weak to strong) and have students rank them. Discuss what makes a thesis defensible, specific, and clear in its line of reasoning.

AP Psychology:

- **A-B-C Method Practice:** Provide students with a list of 5 psychological terms and a scenario. Have them practice writing responses using the Assign-Because-Context format. Grade strictly on specificity—no generic applications allowed.
- **Research Design Deconstruction:** Give students a brief description of a study (real or invented) and have them identify the IV, DV, operational definitions, and potential confounds before writing. Build the habit of analysis before writing.
- **Definition Flashcards:** Have students create flashcards with the formal AP Psychology definition on one side and a specific, real-world application on the other. This prevents the vague definitions that cost points on FRQs.

AP Environmental Science:

- **Calculation Stations:** Set up 3–4 stations around the room, each with a different APES calculation (percent change, population density, energy efficiency). Have students rotate and practice showing all work, including units.
- **Mechanism Mapping:** For environmental processes (e.g., ocean acidification, biomagnification), have students draw flowcharts showing each step of the mechanism. This prevents the ‘it gets worse’ vagueness that loses points.
- **Trade-Off Debates:** For the Synthesis & Evaluation prompts, assign students to argue for different energy solutions or policies. Require them to articulate both the advantages and disadvantages of their assigned solution.

Scaffolding & Differentiation

For Struggling Students:

- **Sentence Starters:** Provide sentence starters for each FRQ type (e.g., “In the scenario, [character] demonstrates [concept], which is defined as [definition], as seen when [specific action].”))
- **Reduced Prompt Sets:** Have struggling students attempt only Parts A–C of an SAQ or only 3 terms in a Concept Application FRQ before building up to the full set.
- **Guided Outlines:** Provide a partially filled outline for the DBQ or LEQ that includes the thesis statement and topic sentences, requiring students to fill in evidence and commentary.

For Advanced Students:

- **Complexity Challenge:** Require advanced students to earn the hardest points on each rubric (DBQ complexity, AP Lang sophistication, APES evaluation/justification).
- **Peer Tutoring:** Have advanced students score their peers' FRQs using the rubric and provide written feedback. Teaching the rubric deepens their own understanding.
- **Alternative Prompts:** Challenge advanced students to write a second response to the same prompt from a different perspective or using a different line of reasoning.

■ **Key Takeaway:** *The most effective FRQ preparation follows a cycle: **Learn the Strategy** → **Practice with Rubrics** → **Compare to Scored Samples** → **Revise and Retry**. This resource provides all the materials you need to implement this cycle consistently across four AP subjects.*

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