The Simple AP® English Language Argument Essay Cheat Sheet

The Argument Task

What You Get

FRQ 3: a short prompt w/ a claim, quote or idea about values or society, & no sources.

Task: argue your position on the idea; you supply all the evidence from what you know.

Timing: ≈ 40 min after the reading period; spend the first 5 min planning your argument.

Row	Pts	Rewards
A: Thesis	0–1	Defensible position
B: Evidence	0–4	Examples + analysis
C: Sophistication	0–1	Complex thinking

What Readers Want

A clear position defended w/ specific, well-explained examples from many different fields.

Reasoning over facts: readers reward how well you explain examples, not famous names.

Read the Prompt

Find the key term ("failure," "ambition") & decide what it means before you argue.

Define it: "failure" could mean a lost game, a failed business or a broken promise; pick 1.

Restate the claim in your own words so your thesis answers the exact question.

Any field counts: history, science, books, sports.

⚠ A personal story w/o a clear link to the claim earns little; always connect it back.

✓ Choose the position you can support w/ 2–3 SPECIFIC examples you know well.

Taking a Position (Row A)

Defensible Thesis

Row A (1 pt): a thesis that answers the prompt w/ a position a reader could disagree with.

Stance	Looks like
Agree	X is true because...
Disagree	X is false because...
Qualify	X is true only when...
Redefine	X depends on what we mean by...

Qualify: "Failure teaches only when people have the support to try again afterward."

Weak vs. Strong

Weak: "There are many opinions about failure." → no position, so it earns 0 for Row A.

Strong: "Failure builds success b/c it forces people to test & rebuild their assumptions."

Preview reasons (optional): name 2–3 reasons so readers can follow your line of reasoning.

Check It

Defensible? Could a thoughtful person argue the opposite? If not, your claim is too obvious.

Placement: put the thesis at the end of a short intro so readers find it quickly & easily.

Specific? Swap vague words ("good," "society") for precise ones you can actually prove.

Thesis ≠ topic: "about ambition" is a topic.

⚠ "It depends" w/ no conditions isn't a position; say WHEN or FOR WHOM it's true.

✓ A qualified thesis sets up Row C from your very first sentence by showing complexity.

Finding Evidence

Brainstorm by Field

Field	Example ideas
History	Movements, leaders, wars
Current events	Tech, climate, policy
Science	Discoveries, failures
Literature	Characters, authors
Business & sports	Comebacks, risks
Personal	School, jobs, family

Brainstorm fast: 2 min listing examples for & against, then pick the side w/ the stronger list.

Strong Evidence Is...

Specific: names, dates & outcomes. "Edison testing thousands of filaments" beats "inventors."

Accurate: if unsure of a detail, describe it generally; never invent numbers or quotes.

Varied: a historical case + a personal one shows your claim holds across contexts.

Personal Experience

Allowed & useful: a specific moment from your life can be strong evidence if you explain it.

Make it specific: "In 10th grade, I lost the debate final b/c..." not "Sometimes I fail at things."

Depth > fame: explain a local case well.

⚠ Hypotheticals ("Imagine if...") are weak evidence; use real cases instead.

✓ Keep an "evidence bank" of 6–8 examples you know deeply; they fit many prompts.

Planning & Organizing

A 5-Minute Plan

Minutes	Do this
0–1	Read prompt; define key term
1–3	Brainstorm examples
3–4	Choose stance + 2–3 reasons
4–5	Match an example to each

Structure

Intro: 1–3 sentences of context + thesis. Skip "since the dawn of time" & definitions.

Body ¶s: 1 reason each, ordered from least to most persuasive, each w/ 1 strong example.

Counter ¶ (optional): state the best opposing view fairly, concede, then answer it.

Conclusion: explain why the issue matters & what should change; don't just repeat your reasons.

Ex outline: failure builds success when people can retry. ¶1 learning (Edison). ¶2 resilience (personal). ¶3: counter (failure crushes people w/o support) → qualify. **Close**: make failure safe in schools.

Body ¶ Template

Reason (topic sentence) → **example** w/ specifics → **commentary** → **link** to thesis.

Topic sentence = a reason, not a fact: "Failure forces people to rethink," not a biography line.

⚠ Organize by your REASONS, not by example (¶ on Edison, ¶ on Rowling); reasons drive it.

✓ 2 deep body ¶s beat 4 thin ones; readers reward explanation, not coverage.

Commentary & Reasoning (Row B)

Row B Levels

Pts	What it looks like
4	Specific evidence, consistently explained line of reasoning
3	Specific evidence, some explanation
2	Some evidence, mostly summary
1	Vague evidence, little explanation
0	Restates or off-task

Explain, Don't Just Tell

After each example ask: so what? How does this prove my reason? Why does it matter?

Ex: "Edison's failed filaments matter b/c each one ruled out an option, turning failure into data."

Connect examples: "Like Edison, Rowling treated publishers' rejections as feedback, not a verdict."

Starters: "This matters because...," "What this case reveals is...," "The same pattern appears..."

Keep the Line

Each ¶ should build on the last: individual → institution → society, so the stakes rise.

Transitions show logic: "More important," "Yet," "This pattern holds beyond science..."

End each ¶ by linking the reason to your thesis.

⚠ A long story w/ 1 sentence of commentary is narration, not argument; flip the ratio.

✓ Write at least as many sentences of commentary as of example in each body ¶.

Counterarguments & Qualifying

Why Address the Other Side

Counterargument: shows fairness & strengthens your claim by answering doubts early.

Strongest objection: answer the best version of the other side, not a weak straw man.

Move	Sounds like
Concede	Granted, some failures crush people...
Refute	Yet those cases lack support...
Qualify	So failure teaches when...

Where to Put It

Option 1: its own ¶ near the end, so you close on your strongest answer to the other side.

Option 2: woven into each body ¶ ("Critics might argue... but"), showing nuance.

Ex: "Granted, failure can crush students w/o support. Yet its value depends on what follows."

Qualify Precisely

Modifiers: often, usually, most; conditions: when, unless, only if. Use them once, well.

Ex: "Social media weakens friendships most when it replaces, rather than adds to, time together."

Signal words: admittedly, granted, critics argue; then still, yet, even so, however, nevertheless.

Don't overdo it: 1 counter ¶ is enough.

⚠ Over-hedging ("maybe, perhaps") hides your position; name a clear condition.

✓ Conceding & answering the strongest objection is a reliable path to Row C.

Sophistication (Row C)

Ways to Earn It

Complexity: explain tensions in the issue (freedom vs. safety) & why those tensions matter.

Context: connect your argument to a broader conversation (technology, history, culture).

Limits: explain where your claim stops holding & what follows for society if it's true.

Style: a vivid, persuasive style can earn it too, but it's the hardest route to rely on alone.

What It Looks Like

Ex: "Failure only teaches those who can afford to fail; for many, the lesson is caution."

Ex: "The real question isn't whether tradition matters, but who decides which ones survive."

Thread it: name the tension in your thesis, return to it in each ¶ & resolve it at the end.

Implications: end by explaining what should change if your claim is right, in schools or policy.

What Doesn't Count

Not enough	Why
Big vocabulary	Style ≠ insight
1 nuance sentence	Must run throughout
"Some disagree"	No analysis of why

Avoid absolutes; nuance beats sweeping claims.

⚠ A single "of course, it's complicated" line won't earn Row C; it must run throughout.

✓ Easiest route: a qualified thesis + a counter ¶ that explains when the other side is right.

Traps, Timing & Checklist

Top Traps

Trap	Fix
Vague examples	Names, dates, places
Story, no analysis	Commentary ≥ example
No position	Commit or qualify
Hypotheticals	Use real cases
Off-prompt	Reread the key term

Timing

Plan: ≈ 5 min planning, 30 min writing, 5 min checking your commentary & links.

Running late? Finish the commentary in your current ¶ rather than starting a new example.

Write order: thesis → body ¶s → counter ¶ → short conclusion; a brief intro is fine.

Final Checklist

Thesis takes a clear, defensible position on the prompt's exact idea, not just its topic.

Each example is specific & followed by commentary explaining how it proves your reason.

Counterargument or qualification appears at least once & is answered, not just mentioned.

Last 2 min: check every example has commentary. Typed in Bluebook: save 1 min to proofread.

⚠ Don't invent statistics or quotes; readers notice, & it hurts your credibility.

✓ The 3 FRQs = 55% of your score; this essay counts as much as the other 2.