ALBERT

The Ultimate AP® English Language Argument Essay Cheat Sheet

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The Argument Task

What You Get

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

Task: "Write an essay that argues your position on..."; you supply all the evidence from what you know.

Ex prompt type: "Write an essay that argues your position on the value of failure." No right answer exists.

Timing: ≈ 40 min after the 15-min reading period; spend 5 min planning before writing a single word.

Row	Pts	Rewards
A: Thesis	0–1	Defensible position
B: Evidence	0–4	Specific examples + commentary
C: Sophistication	0–1	Complex thinking

What Readers Want

A clear position on the prompt's idea, defended w/ specific, well-explained examples from many fields.

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

Any field counts: history, current events, science, literature, sports, business, personal experience.

Read the Prompt

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

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

Restate the claim in your own words so your thesis answers the exact question, not a nearby one.

⚠ Retelling the prompt or writing a personal story w/o connecting it to the claim earns little.

✓ Pick a position you can support w/ 2–3 SPECIFIC examples you know well; that matters most.

Taking a Position (Row A)

Defensible Thesis

Row A (1 pt): a thesis that responds to the prompt w/ a defensible position; may be 1+ sentences.

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 is often strongest: "Failure teaches only when people have the support to try again afterward."

Weak vs. Strong

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

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

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

Placement: end of a short intro (1–3 sentences) so readers find it fast; it frames every body paragraph.

Check It

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

Specific? Replace vague words ("good," "bad," "society") w/ precise ones that you can actually prove.

Answer the question asked: a prompt about "the value of failure" needs a claim about value, not a definition.

Thesis ≠ topic: "This essay is about ambition" states a topic; "Ambition helps only when..." states a claim.

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

✓ A qualified thesis sets up Row C: you're already explaining complexity from the 1st sentence.

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 before choosing a position; pick the stronger list.

Strong Evidence Is...

Specific: names, dates, places & outcomes. "Edison testing thousands of filament materials" beats "many inventors."

Accurate: if unsure of a detail, describe it generally rather than invent a number, a date or a quote.

Varied: mixing fields (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 well & briefly.

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

Ex bank: Apollo 13, Rosa Parks, the Wright brothers, a novel you've read, a local issue & 1 personal story.

Depth > fame: a well-explained local example beats a famous one you only half remember the details of.

Mix scales: 1 big public case + 1 small personal case.

⚠ Hypotheticals ("Imagine if...") are weak evidence; use real cases whenever you can find them.

✓ Keep a personal "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" & dictionary definitions entirely.

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

Counter ¶ (optional): state the best opposing view fairly, concede what's true about it, then answer it.

Conclusion: explain the stakes or implications, not just a summary of the reasons already given.

Ex outline: Thesis: failure builds success when people can try again. ¶1 learning (Edison). ¶2 resilience (personal).

¶3 & close: counter (failure crushes people w/o support) → qualify. Close: schools should make failure safe.

Order reasons by persuasiveness or by scale (individual → society) so each ¶ raises the stakes for readers.

Body ¶ Template

1. Reason (topic sentence) → **2. Example** w/ specifics → **3. Commentary** → **4. Link** back to the thesis.

Commentary = how the example proves the reason & why it matters (2–4 sentences, the biggest part).

Topic sentence = a reason, not a fact: "Failure forces people to rethink," not "Edison was an inventor."

⚠ Don't organize by example (¶ on Edison, ¶ on Rowling); organize by your reasons instead, every time.

✓ 2 deep body ¶s beat 4 thin ones; readers reward explanation, not how much ground you cover.

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 should my readers care about it?

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

Connect examples: "Like Edison, Rowling treated 12 publishers' rejections as feedback, not as a final verdict."

Commentary moves: explain cause & effect, compare 2 examples, name the principle the example proves.

Sentence 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, or obvious → surprising ideas.

Transitions show logic: "More important," "Yet," "This pattern holds beyond science, too..." not "Also."

Specific details make commentary possible: you can't explain what you haven't described precisely.

End each ¶ by linking the reason to your thesis.

⚠ A long story w/ 1 sentence of commentary is narration, not argument; flip that ratio in every ¶.

✓ Aim for at least as many sentences of commentary as sentences of example in every body paragraph.

Counterarguments & Qualifying

Why Address the Other Side

Counterargument: shows fairness (ethos) & strengthens your claim by answering doubts before readers raise them.

Strongest objection: choose the best version of the other side, not a weak one; a straw man hurts your ethos.

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, right before the conclusion, so you close on your strongest answer.

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

Ex counter ¶: "Granted, repeated failure can crush students w/o support. Yet that shows failure's value depends on what follows it, so schools should make retrying normal."

Turn it: the best rebuttals use the objection to sharpen your claim, not just dismiss it as simply wrong.

Qualify Precisely

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

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

Alternative perspective: a different angle (not the opposite) that complicates your claim, e.g., cultural views of failure.

Signal words: admittedly, granted, critics argue, while it's true that; then: still, yet, even so, however.

Don't overdo it: 1 strong counter ¶ is enough; spending half the essay on the other side weakens your position.

⚠ Over-hedging ("maybe, perhaps, in some ways") hides your position; qualify w/ a clear condition.

✓ Conceding & then answering the strongest objection is the most reliable path toward Row C.

Sophistication (Row C)

Ways to Earn It

Complexity: explain the tensions in the issue (freedom vs. safety, ambition vs. ethics) & why they matter.

Context: situate the argument in a broader conversation (technology, history, culture) & explain why.

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

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

What It Looks Like

Ex: "Failure only teaches those who can afford to fail; for many, the lesson is caution, not growth."

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

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

Precise words: "resilience," "complacency," "privilege" let you name complex ideas exactly; use them correctly.

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

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.

Ex: "Ambition drives progress, but unchecked, it turns colleagues into rivals; the best leaders channel it."

⚠ Row C needs sustained complexity; a single "of course, it's complicated" line won't earn it at all.

✓ 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; don't let FRQ 1 & 2 steal this essay's writing time.

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

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

Final Checklist

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

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 in passing.

Conclusion says why the issue matters; it doesn't just repeat your thesis & your reasons word for word.

Last 2 min: check that every example has commentary & that every ¶ links back to your thesis clearly.

Typed in Bluebook: save 1 min to proofread.

Reread the prompt once midway through.

⚠ Don't invent statistics or quotes; readers notice, & made-up evidence weakens your credibility.

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