The Ultimate AP® English Language Style Cheat Sheet

7.A Diction

Word Choice Matters

Diction: a writer's word choice; it shapes tone, credibility & how the audience feels about the subject.

Denotation = dictionary meaning. **Connotation** = the feelings a word carries (+, −, neutral) for readers.

Neutral	Positive	Negative
thin	slender	scrawny
confident	assured	arrogant
protesters	activists	rioters
cheap	affordable	shoddy
old	seasoned	outdated

Kinds of Diction

Formal vs. informal (register): formal builds authority; informal builds closeness & a conversational feel.

Concrete vs. abstract: concrete ("cracked school roofs") makes stakes vivid; abstract ("decay") states ideas.

Loaded language: emotionally charged words that push a view ("radical," "heroic"); watch for bias.

Jargon: specialist terms signal expertise but can lose a general audience if they're left unexplained.

Analyze It

Ask: why this word & not a synonym? What does it reveal about the writer's attitude & purpose?

Pattern: track repeated word families (war words, sickness words) that build a single image or tone.

Ex: "The bill **guts** school funding" vs. "The bill **reduces** it": same fact, far angrier attitude toward it.

⚠ "The author uses strong diction" says nothing; quote the word & explain its connotation's effect.

✓ Quote 1–3 words, not whole sentences, so your commentary can focus on exactly what the word does.

7.A Tone & Shifts

Tone = Attitude

Tone: the writer's attitude toward the subject or audience, built through diction, syntax & chosen details.
Mood = how the reader feels; tone = how the writer feels. Don't swap them on MCQs or in essays.

Positive	Negative	Neutral/complex
admiring	bitter	objective
reverent	sardonic	detached
hopeful	indignant	ambivalent
celebratory	mocking	contemplative
earnest	condescending	wry

Name It Precisely

Avoid vague words (good, bad, emotional, negative); pick 1 exact adjective, then prove it w/ diction.
Two-part tone: "bitter yet hopeful" or "respectful but firm" shows a complex attitude & earns credit.

Shifts

Tone shift: a change in attitude, often after a turn word (but, yet, however), a new ¶, or a new subject.
Why shift? To pivot from problem to solution, from concession to rebuttal, or from story to call to act.
Irony: saying the opposite of what is meant (verbal) or an outcome opposite to what's expected.
Build the proof: tone claim → 2–3 quoted words that create it → how those words create that attitude.
Ex: "so-called experts" & "their tidy charts" → a sardonic, dismissive tone toward the opposing side.
Tone toward audience: can differ from tone toward the subject (warm to readers, scornful of a policy).

⚠ Satire may sound serious on the surface; read for exaggeration & irony before naming the tone.

✓ Tone MCQs: eliminate choices that are too extreme or off in direction (+ vs. −), then compare the rest.

7.A Figurative Language

Comparisons

Device	What it does
Metaphor	Equates 2 unlike things
Simile	Compares w/ like/as
Analogy	Explains via a parallel case
Allusion	Borrows a shared reference
Personification	Gives human traits
Extended metaphor	Builds 1 image throughout

Analogy works when the audience knows the familiar case well; a weak match invites a false analogy.
Allusion (Bible, history, myth, pop culture) borrows authority or emotion the audience already grants.

Emphasis & Restraint

Hyperbole: exaggeration for emphasis or humor.
Understatement: saying less to create irony or calm.
Imagery: sensory detail that lets readers see, hear or feel the stakes; often builds pathos & urgency.
Rhetorical question: asked for effect, not an answer; it engages readers & implies the writer's claim.

Analyze It

Ask: what is compared to what, & what does the comparison make readers feel or believe about it?
Ex: calling a law "a cage" frames it as confinement; readers sense loss of freedom before any data.
Metonymy: a related thing stands for the whole ("the White House said"; "the pen is mightier than the sword").
Paradox: a seeming contradiction that reveals a truth ("the more we connect online, the lonelier we feel").

⚠ Spotting a metaphor isn't analysis; explain what it suggests about the subject & why it suits the audience.

✓ Extended metaphors often frame a whole passage; trace them from the first image to the last.

7.A Syntax: Sentences

Sentence Types

Type	Built from	Effect
Simple	1 clause	Direct, blunt
Compound	2+ ICs	Balance, link
Complex	IC + DC	Show relations
Fragment	Part only	Punch, emphasis

Periodic sentence: main clause comes last, after a build-up; creates suspense & emphasis at the end.
Loose (cumulative) sentence: main clause first, then details pile up; feels natural, expansive & relaxed.

Length & Rhythm

Short sentence after long ones = emphasis; it lands like a punch: "The bridge failed. Twice." Note the pause.
Long, winding sentences can mirror complexity, exhaustion or a flood of thought for the reader to feel.
Variety: a mix of lengths keeps rhythm alive; a run of identical sentences may signal deliberate effect.

Sentence Functions

Declarative states; **interrogative** asks; **imperative** commands ("Act now"); **exclamatory** exclaims.
Imperatives in a conclusion push readers toward the call to action; questions invite them to think.
Inversion: unusual word order ("Gone are the days...") puts emphasis on the first words of a sentence.
Ex: periodic: "Despite the cost, the delays & the doubters, the bridge opened." → suspense lands on "opened."
Sentence openers: starting w/ a subordinate clause ("Although...") previews a concession before the claim.

⚠ Labeling "a compound sentence" earns nothing; explain what the structure emphasizes or connects.

✓ Check what comes LAST in a sentence; English puts the most emphasis at the end, so writers save key words.

7.A Syntax: Patterns

Repetition Schemes

Device	Pattern	Example
Anaphora	Repeat start	"We shall fight..."
Epistrophe	Repeat end	"...of the people"
Parallelism	Same structure	"to see, to act"
Tricolon	Series of 3	"came, saw, conquered"
Antithesis	Contrast in balance	"not...but..."
Chiasmus	Reversed order	"Ask not what..."

Anaphora builds rhythm & urgency; listeners remember it, which is why great speeches lean on it so often.
Antithesis sharpens a choice by setting opposites side by side in balanced, parallel clauses for contrast.

Lists & Joining

Asyndeton: no conjunctions ("I came, I saw, I conquered") → speed, force & a sense of completeness.
Polysyndeton: many conjunctions ("and...and...and") → weight, abundance, a slowed, building pace.
Juxtaposition: placing contrasting ideas or images next to each other to highlight the difference.

Analyze It

Template: "By repeating ___ at the start of each sentence, X builds ___, urging [audience] to ___ now."
Link to purpose: patterns aim at memory & emotion; ask what the audience should remember or feel.
Ex: King's "I have a dream" anaphora makes each new hope feel inevitable & ties the speech together.
Parallelism in your essay: parallel topic sentences make your line of reasoning easy to follow & remember.

⚠ Naming anaphora is the start, not the analysis; explain why repetition suits THIS moment & audience.

✓ Speeches are rich in schemes; in a rhetorical analysis essay, they make ideal, quotable evidence.

7.B / 8.B–8.C Punctuation & Clarity

Punctuation for Effect

Mark	Effect
Dash —	Sudden emphasis, aside
Colon :	Reveal, explain, list
Semicolon ;	Balance 2 linked ideas
Parentheses ( )	Quiet aside
Italics	Stress a word
Ellipsis ...	Trailing, omission

Dash vs. parentheses: dashes spotlight the inserted idea; parentheses whisper it as a side note.
Colon creates a pause that sets up a payoff: "She wanted one thing: respect." The word after it lands hard.

Clear, Effective Sentences (8.B)

Active voice names the actor ("The council cut funds"); **passive** can hide blame ("Funds were cut").
Emphasis by position: put the key idea at the end of a sentence or paragraph, where it lands hardest.
Concision: cut wordy phrases ("due to the fact that" → "because") so the argument stays sharp.

Conventions (8.C)

Grammar & mechanics serve clarity; errors that blur meaning hurt credibility & the line of reasoning.
Agreement & reference: a vague "this" or "they" confuses readers; name the noun if it isn't clear.
Ex: "Mistakes were made" (passive) avoids saying who made them; writers & officials use this on purpose.
Semicolon balance: "Some build walls; others build bridges." → 2 equal ideas weighed side by side.

⚠ Passive voice isn't always wrong; writers use it on purpose to shift focus or avoid naming who acted.

✓ Writing MCQs on combining sentences: pick the choice that's clear, concise & shows the right logic.

Style on the MCQ

Reading Questions (Skill 7)

Weight: Style = reading 11–14% + writing 11–14% of the 45-question MCQ section, so ≈ 22–28% of the MCQs.

Stem says	You do
"primarily serves to"	Name the effect
"tone of ¶"	Precise attitude
"word X suggests"	Use connotation
"figurative"	What's compared
"shift in tone"	Find the turn

In context: "As used in line 12, 'cultivate' most nearly means..." → reread the full sentence first.

Writing Questions (Skill 8)

Word choice: "Which choice best maintains the tone of the passage?" → match register & attitude.
Precision: pick the word that's exact & vivid for the context, not the fanciest-sounding option in the list.
Combine / revise: the best version is clear, concise & keeps the original meaning & emphasis of the sentence.

Method

Predict the effect or tone in your own words, then match; check direction (+/−) & intensity of each choice.
Effect Qs: "The use of the word 'merely' in line 8 serves to..." → often to minimize or dismiss an opposing view.
Syntax Qs: "The short sentence in line 20 primarily..." → emphasizes a key point or marks a sharp turn.
Figurative Qs: decode the comparison 1st (X is like Y in what way?), then match the purpose it serves.
Shift Qs: find the turn word or new ¶, name the tone before & after, then pick the choice that names both.

⚠ Extreme tone choices ("furious," "ecstatic") are usually wrong unless the passage is extreme too.

✓ For "effect" stems, the right answer links the device to the passage's purpose or argument.

Style on the FRQs

Rhetorical Analysis (Q2)

Analyze choices: diction, imagery, syntax & figurative language are the evidence you quote & explain.
Formula: writer + strong verb + choice + effect on audience + purpose ("Churchill's anaphora steels...").

Weak verb	Strong verb
uses	deploys, invokes
shows	reveals, exposes
says	asserts, insists
talks about	examines, dismantles
makes readers feel	evokes, stirs, unsettles

Your Own Style

Argument & synthesis: a vivid, persuasive style (precise words, varied syntax) can help earn Row C.
Match register to the prompt's audience: formal & measured for a school board, a city council, a court.
Avoid: slang, "you" sentences aimed at the reader, clichés ("since the dawn of time") & empty filler words.

Quick Wins

Embed short quotes (2–6 words) & analyze single words; long block quotes eat time & hide analysis.
Vary sentences: end a paragraph w/ a short, sharp sentence to land your point; readers remember it.
Ex RA sentence: "Kennedy's antithesis, 'Ask not...,' reframes citizenship as duty, challenging a comfortable audience."
Group by effect: organize RA paragraphs by what choices DO (build urgency), not by device ("diction ¶").

⚠ A device list ("uses imagery, diction & syntax") w/o purpose is the most common weak RA thesis.

✓ In RA essays, tie every style choice to the writer's purpose & audience; that's what Row B rewards.