

AP English Language and Composition
Question 3: Argument
2020 Scoring Commentaries
(Applied to 2018 Student Responses)

Index of Scores for Samples: Question 3

Sample Reference	Row A	Row B	Row C
C	1	4	1
G	1	4	1
E	1	3	1
I	1	3	0
B	1	2	0
A	1	2	0
F	1	1	0
D	0	1	0
H	0	1	0

AP English Language and Composition
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Sample C

6/6 Points (A1 – B4 – C1)

Row A: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row A because it takes a defensible position that exploring the unknown is valuable. In the first paragraph, the response sets up a connection with the quote in the prompt and then lays out the categories for the reasoning that will follow: “The exploration of the unknown has led to unprecedented scientific development, cultural development, and personal development alike.”

Row B: 4/4

The response earned four points for Row B because the evidence supports all claims in a line of reasoning and the commentary that explains those connections is consistent and well-developed. Over the course of this response, the argument focuses on the idea that the most beneficial and forward-thinking advancements come from challenging the status quo and engaging with the unknown. The range of examples is far-reaching and touches on history, science, music, and literature. In paragraph two, the response moves from an example of JFK challenging the American space program to explore the unknown “not because it is easy, but because it is hard” and then shifts to the example of Galileo and “his desire to enter into the unfamiliar that led to the scientific advances.” The accompanying commentary then strengthens the previous example as it provides a list of scientists in the same vein as Galileo who “made their names by engaging with the unknown.” Here, the commentary argues that Galileo’s legacy spurs a generation of scientists to whom humanity “will forever be indebted to for their tenacity.” The response then transitions to the cultural importance of music in paragraph three, explicitly explaining how Bach “explored new territory in music” and ultimately “changed the face of string and orchestral music...” Shostakovich’s 12th String Quartet is also discussed as an exploration of “the limitless possibilities of sound.” The response explains that culture has benefitted from composers who were not afraid of “breaking the constraints of cultural norms and exploring the unknown,” again furthering the response’s line of reasoning. Finally, the literary example of Henry David Thoreau’s transcendental philosophy explains how he engaged the unknown as he “famously spent a period of his life living in seclusion.” The response explains that the positive results of Thoreau’s experiences were the “new genre” of his writings and that those writings speak to an individual’s personal development. While much of this example reads like a summary of Thoreau’s experience, there is enough commentary that connects those details to the thesis to make it an effective example. The response is driven by the line of reasoning throughout, cumulating in its clear articulation in the concluding sentence: “The unknown has allowed the human race to develop, improve, and augment itself scientifically, culturally, and personally, and for those causes, it is clearly incredibly valuable.”

AP English Language and Composition
Question 3: Argument
2020 Scoring Commentaries
(Applied to 2018 Student Responses)

Row C: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row C for making effective rhetorical choices that consistently strengthen the student’s argument. Beyond simply transitioning effectively from one paragraph to another, statements such as “Like scientists, musicians are known for being barrier-breakers” and “Like Bach and Shostakovich, Thoreau helped to establish a new genre in his craft” illustrate thoughtful and sophisticated planning to not only acknowledge other examples but also link them topically in order to create a cohesion that is often uncharacteristic of exam responses.

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Sample G

6/6 Points (A1 – B4 – C1)

Row A: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row A because it crafts a thesis statement that presents a defensible position in paragraph two that “venturing into the unknown is a worthwhile experience for the maturity and growth it can promote.” Though the thesis appears in paragraph two and not in the first paragraph, it is important to note thesis statements may appear anywhere in the text.

Row B: 4/4

The response earned four points for Row B because the evidence supports all claims in the line of reasoning which is explicitly stated in the conclusion. In paragraph one, the response begins with a personal anecdote about the writer’s experience with a ropes course, which begins to illustrate the claims of the thesis to come in the next paragraph. The end of that anecdote explains how “Nowadays, climbing is one of my favorite activities” and goes on to explain the benefit of the experience: “if I had not ventured out of my comfort zone into the unknown and frightening, then I may have never climbed at all for the rest of my life.” This commentary establishes the positive attitude toward the “value of exploring the unknown” and effectively leads into a more conceptual and philosophical exploration of the unknown and its value in paragraph two. Though not organized as well as the first two paragraphs, paragraph three does provide a variety of examples related to exploration of the unknown. The response discusses how mistakes and failures during exploration develop character and examines Christopher Columbus “having no knowledge of what lay ahead” despite “possible negative repercussions.” While these examples occasionally venture into a discussion of risk taking, the response repeatedly returns to the larger line of reasoning that “exploring the unknown” is the way in which individuals “find answers” and solve problems.

Row C: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row C because the style is consistently effective and persuasive. Language such as, “Exploring the unknown is a rewarding, if initially terrifying experience,” proves sophistication of thought about the prompt. This sophistication occurs throughout the response. The following sentences from paragraph three also exemplify this sophistication: “Performers may forget song lyrics, or musicians might miss some notes, climbers might fall early. But with each failure, people become more familiar with the unknown. They learn how to recover from mistakes, how to never even make any.”

AP English Language and Composition
Question 3: Argument
2020 Scoring Commentaries
(Applied to 2018 Student Responses)

Sample E

5/6 Points (A1 – B3 – C1)

Row A: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row A because it provides a thesis with a defensible position in the last two sentences of paragraph one: “The exploration of the unknown is critical to the development of a person and allows them to break out of perceived limitations. The value of exploring the unknown is rooted in its ability to expand a person view of the world and themselves while simultaneously crafting memorable experiences and breaking previously perceived personal barriers.”

Row B: 3/4

The response earned three points for Row B because the evidence relates to the thesis. The commentary about that evidence does not always support key claims. In paragraph two, the example of personal growth through experiences with the unknown develops into a comment “that persons view of the world and themselves is perminatly changed.” The response then restates this idea in the very next sentence before providing a personal anecdote. That anecdote, however, is followed by a vague comment on how “people can learn a lot and grow tremendously as a person by expanding their world view.” Though this implies a connection back to the thesis regarding the “value of exploring the unknown,” that implication is not enough to sustain the argument and the response nearly veers off topic into a related argument about expanding one’s world view. The model UN example follows the reasoning established in the thesis as it focuses on “crafting memorable experience,” but then retreats to commentary very similar to that from the previous paragraph, explaining that the memories of the experience “would not exist if I did not venture into the unknown and put myself out there.” The response then provides another example regarding a friend “who was hesitant to take AP classes” but then flourished having “journed into the unknown and taken these classes.” These positive examples are connected to the thesis, by only a single comment about how “exploring the unknown is ecencial,” but there is little else provided to explain the anecdotes. The entirety of paragraph four provides an appropriate reminder of the line of reasoning as it discussed “the tremendous personal growth a person experiences” by pursuing exploration.

Row C: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row C because it articulates the implications of the argument by situating it within a broader context. Examples include attending a “school retreat,” “Model UN,” and “AP courses.” The response discusses how these experiences lend themselves to “...the value of exploring the unknown lies in the tremendous personal growth a person experiences through expanded perspectives, new memories, and new expanded boundaries.”

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Sample I

4/6 Points (A1 – B3 – C0)

Row A: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row A because it provides a thesis with a defensible position: “‘Choosing’ this unknown is vital for the development of society, and the development of ourselves.”

Row B: 3/4

The response earned three points for Row B because the evidence supports all claims in the line of reasoning. Only some of the commentary appropriately supports those claims. The line of reasoning focuses on the growth and development of individuals. In paragraph two, the response offers vague incomplete commentary on some non-specific examples related to how “ingenuitive and intelligent” humans are and then explains that none of these advances would be possible without “exploration or experimentation with the unknown.” The response does little more than to argue that without exploration “everyone would live the same boring lives.” While the response does move to more specific evidence in the Space X reference, it does not provide any depth of commentary outside of mentioning that “new technologies” will help to “revolutionize our society.” Paragraph three offers evidence, specifically focused on “trying new things,” but again lapses into a discussion that without exploring the unknown, “we would live cold, empty and boring lives.” The response explains that “Trying new things is how people develop themselves,” but then goes on to only restate this idea in different ways before providing an example of an introverted child who “...will miss out on many fun experiences and relationships.” In this way, the commentary fails to support the claim that “the development of ourselves through choosing the unknown is even more important.”

Row C: 0/1

The response did not earn a point for Row C. There are several unsuccessful attempts in the response to engage with the complexities of the topic. For example, the response suggests that it “is widely known that humans try to resist changes,” but then only states that “those that are tempted to explore unknowns are often rewarded heavily and society benefits as a result.” In paragraph three, the response attempts to explain how exploring the unknown can result in danger, but then does not provide sophisticated argumentation or commentary that explains why “it is perfectly reasonable to ignore that option.”

AP English Language and Composition
Question 3: Argument
2020 Scoring Commentaries
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Sample B

3/6 Points (A1 – B2 – C0)

Row A: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row A because it provides a thesis with a defensible position: “Discovering things we don’t know is not always a good thing. It’s costly, time consuming, and even harmful to development of humankind.” The list in the thesis serves as the organizing principle for the body paragraphs.

Row B: 2/4

The response earned two points for Row B because it provides some specific evidence relevant to the thesis. The line of reasoning is not clear in the body paragraphs and the writing often lapses into sweeping generalizations. Paragraph two references NASA and its use of “millions of dollars for space exploration every year” to illustrate the unnecessary cost of “exploring the unknown.” While paragraph two begins with an argument about the cost of exploration, it shifts, with little explanation, to focus on time “spent trying to discover the unknown [that] could be used for other tasks.” This argument about time is not fully established in the body paragraph. Paragraph two continues the discussion about how time could be better leveraged for “things that need to be solved today,” but it does not explain why today’s problems have more value than exploration. In paragraph four, the idea that exploration of the unknown will lead to “disappointment rather than fulfillment” is focused, but there is very little commentary to support this argument. Instead, the reference to “Stranger Things” simply makes a sweeping generalization about how the “main characters devote their time to examine an unknown other world” and this devotion “brings many disasters.”

Row C: 0/1

The response did not earn a point for Row C. The response attempts to craft nuanced argumentation but only creates sweeping generalizations. The first two sentences in paragraph four exemplify this type of oversimplification: “Some people may say that there are many benefits to discovering the unknown. However, there are also many disadvantages.” Statements of this type do not demonstrate sophistication of thought and suggest a limited understanding of effective rhetorical choices.

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(Applied to 2018 Student Responses)

Sample A

3/6 Points (A1 – B2 – C0)

Row A: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row A because it provides a thesis with a defensible position: “Although some people tend to not chase the unknown to explore, it would be beneficial for them to do so because there is a whole world outside their window and once can never know if there is something better in life if they never explore in order to find it.” While lengthy and prone to generalization, the response identifies the benefits of exploration as finding “something better in life.”

Row B: 2/4

The response earned two points for Row B because it provides examples relevant to the subject, but the commentary merely repeats and oversimplifies when explaining those examples. For example, in paragraph two, the comment that “Clark would not have met his wife, Sacajawaja” without his expedition is technically correct, but there is little commentary to explain how this directly connects to the thesis. Instead, the response lapses into a discussion about why one “should never be satisfied with their life.” There is no connection made between why a lack of satisfaction should fuel an individual’s desire for exploration. In paragraph three, the response argues that fear can keep individuals from exploration, but it does not provide commentary that relates to the thesis. The evidence about the 49ers is general and the attempt at explanation, “because the unknown could end up holding a gold nugget” is difficult to understand.

Row C: 0/1

The response did not earn a point for Row C. The language in the response is simple and relies upon sweeping generalizations throughout. The lack of commentary in the response prevents it from being able to develop sophistication or complexity.

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Question 3: Argument
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Sample F

2/6 Points (A1 – B1 – C0)

Row A: 1/1

The response earned a point for Row A because it provides a thesis with a defensible position that “exploring the unknown is essential to be a well-cultured and intelligent individual.” While this thesis is simplistic and it occurs in the middle of the response (paragraph four), it still provides a clear position.

Row B: 1/4

The response earned one point for Row B because the evidence is overly general with very little specificity. While paragraph two creates a useful distinction that the “unknown” need not be “space or deep in the ocean,” the discussion of “food” and the hesitancy to “try something new” is not accompanied by commentary that takes a position on exploring the unknown. Instead, the response states, “we have no trust for the new food, only skepticism.” This statement does not clearly relate to the task of the prompt. The example in paragraph three related to people being “naturally adventurous” shows promise but does not prove the value of exploring the unknown. Overall, the response does not provide any discernible commentary that relates to the argument.

Row C: 0/1

The response did not earn the point for Row C. The language is simplistic and repetitive. The response attempts to contextualize the argument relative to all people, but never moves beyond blanket statements about “Some people” and generalized comments about humanity.

AP English Language and Composition
Question 3: Argument
2020 Scoring Commentaries
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Sample D

1/6 Points (A0 – B1 – C0)

Row A: 0/1

The response did not earn a point for Row A because it does not present a thesis with a defensible position. Instead, the response provides generalized discussion of the quotation included in the prompt.

Row B: 1/4

The response earned one point for Row B because it provides evidence that is mostly general, but there is little to no commentary. In paragraph two, the response attempts to define the unknown by reflecting on personal experience (i.e. falling in love), but the response lacks commentary to contextualize this experience. The body paragraphs do little more than list personal events such as “little dates in the park” and describe the student’s accompanying feelings that these moments “keep me humble.”

Row C: 0/1

The response did not earn a point for Row C. The language is simple and there is no evidence of complexity of reasoning.

AP English Language and Composition
Question 3: Argument
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Sample H

1/6 Points (A0 – B1 – C0)

Row A: 0/1

The response did not earn a point for Row A because it does not offer a thesis with a defensible position. While it does provide a statement that includes positions on the value of opportunities to explore the unknown, explaining that “Sometimes, these oppernuties are great,” it then equivocates by stating that, “Other times, they can lead to mistakes.”

Row B: 1/4

The response earned one point for Row B because it provides evidence that is mostly general and only briefly describes that evidence. The examples of humans living on a “schedule” and people missing out on “opportunities ... due to possible disappointment” certainly relate to the subject of the prompt, but there is so little commentary that these connections can only be implied.

Row C: 0/1

The response did not earn a point for Row C because there is no sophistication of thought.