Abstract Topics for the Junior AP English Language and Composition Research Paper

The primary objective of this assignment is that students will practice forming an individual stance using evidence from a list of varied resources. This research paper assignment is modeled after the open-ended question as it appears on the Advanced Placement Exam. This assignment requires that students have a mature knowledge of the issues that affect the world today. The following list of abstract topics have been implied or expressed in questions on various AP English Lang/Comp exams since the mid-1980s.

Abstract Topic #1: Accepting Death

Choose works that explore death. Your goal is to write a carefully reasoned research paper that examines the attitudes or traditions that affect how Americans view death. Using these readings, and your own observations and experiences, you will develop your own conclusions about this complex subject. Use the following quotes to help you establish the scope of your topic. You will need to: 1) specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:

- “Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It’s the transition that’s troublesome.” Isaac Asimov
- “Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales; so is the other.” Sir Francis Bacon
- “What is there to do when people die—people so dear and rare—but bring them back by remembering.” May Sarton
- “It is possible to provide security against other ills, but as far as death is concerned, we men live in a city without walls.” Epicurus
- “Life is a preparation for the future; and the best preparation for the future is to live life as if there were none.” Elbert Hubbard

Possible Sources:


Abstract Topic #2: Change

Some writers seem to advocate changes in American social or political attitudes, or in traditions. Choose works that advocate some kind of change. Your goal is to write a carefully reasoned research paper that examines the American attitudes or traditions that you wish to modify. Using these readings and your own observations and experiences, you will develop your own conclusions about this complex subject. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:

- “If you don’t like something, change it. If you can’t change it, change your attitude. Don’t Complain.” Maya Angelou
- “If we don’t change, we don’t grow. If we don’t grow, we aren’t really living.” Gail Sheehy
- “There is in the worst of fortune the best of chances for a happy change.” Euripides
- “There is a certain relief in change, even though it be from bad to worse! As I have often found in traveling in a stagecoach, that it is often a comfort to shift one’s position, and be bruised in a new place.” Washington Irving
- “I’ve never met a person, I don’t care what his condition, in whom I could not see possibilities. I don’t care how much a man may consider himself a failure, I believe in him, for he can change the thing that is wrong in his life any time he is ready and prepared to do it. Whenever he develops the desire, he can take away from his life the thing that is defeating it. The capacity for reformation and change lies within.” Preston Bradley
- “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” Leo Tolstoy
- “Things do not change, we do.” Henry David Thoreau
- “He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils.” Sir Francis Bacon
- “Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.” Robert F. Kennedy

Possible Sources:
Deloria, Vine. *American Indians, American Justice*. Austin: University of Texas Press,
Abstract Topic #3: Alienation because of Gender, Race, Class, or Creed

Select works in which a conflict exists because the will of the majority opposes the will of an individual in America. Using these readings and your own observations and experiences, you will develop some conclusions about the moral and ethical implications for both the individual and society. Your goal is to write a carefully reasoned research paper which takes a stance on the subject of alienation in America. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:

- “Without alienation, there can be no politics.” Arthur Miller (b. 1915), *Marxism Today* (London, January 1988),
- “Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law.” James Baldwin
- “Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule.” Buddha
- “Hatred is by far the longest pleasure;/Men love in haste, but they detest at leisure.” Lord Byron
- “Hatred is like fire — it makes even light rubbish deadly.” George Eliot
- “A good indignation brings out all one’s powers.” Ralph Waldo Emerson
• “National hatred is something peculiar. You will always find it strongest and most violent where there is the lowest degree of culture.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

• “If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself. What isn’t part of ourselves doesn’t disturb us.” Herman Hesse

• “Don’t hate, it’s too big a burden to bear.” Martin Luther King, Sr.

• “A man who lives, not by what he loves but what he hates, is a sick man.” Archibald MacLeish

• “Like the greatest virtue and the worst dogs, the fiercest hatred is silent.” Jean Paul Richter

• “Few people can be happy unless they hate some other person, nation, or creed.” Bertrand Russel

• “I shall never permit myself to stoop so low as to hate any man.” Booker T. Washington

• “You cannot hate other people without hating yourself.” Oprah Winfrey

Possible Sources:


De Crevecoeur, J. Hector St John. Letters from an American Farmer.


Greene, Graham. The Power and the Glory.


Abstract Topic #4: Violence

Violence is a predominant thread in the setting of many American works. Choose works in which the reader is confronted with a scene or scenes of violence. Your goal is to write a carefully nuanced research paper which explores the nature of violence as well as its effect on Americans. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopic that verbalizes various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:
- “Evil is wrought by want of thought, as well as want of heart.” Thomas Hood
- “Human nature causes hatred toward others. To not act out on these feelings is the challenge in life.” Anonymous

Possible Sources:
Abstract Topic #5: Family Relationships

Some works depict a conflict between a parent and a child. Choose works from a list of works that explore this conflict. Then write a carefully nuanced research paper that examines the sources of the conflict and the possible implications. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic—to begin to specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue—to begin to develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:

- “The family is one of nature’s masterpieces.” George Santayana
- “A family is a unit composed not only of children but of men, women, an occasional animal, and the common cold.” Ogden Nash
- “The family you come from isn’t as important as the family you’re going to have.” Ring Lardner
- “He that raises a large family does, indeed, while he lives to observe them, stand a broader mark for sorrow; but then he stands a broader mark for pleasure too.” Benjamin Franklin
- “The greatest thing in family life is to take a hint when a hint is intended—and not to take a hint when a hint isn’t intended.” Robert Frost
- “If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.” George Bernard Shaw
- “Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.” Oscar Wilde
- “Let the child’s first lesson be obedience, and the second will be what thou wilt.” Benjamin Franklin
- “Children in a family are like flowers in a bouquet: there’s always one determined to face in an opposite direction from the way the arranger desires.” Marcelene Cox
- “To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.” Cicero
“Children are one-third of our population and all of our future.” Select Panel for the Promotion of Child Health, 1981

“There was never a child so lovely but his mother was glad to get him asleep.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

“We can’t form our children on our own concepts; we must take them and love them as God gives them to us.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself... You may house their bodies but not their souls. For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.” Kahlil Gilbran, from The Prophet

“The first half of our lives is ruined by our parents and the second half by our children.” Clarence Darrow

“How many hopes and fears, how many ardent wishes and anxious apprehensions are twisted together in the threads that connect the parent with the child!” Samuel Griswold Goodrich

“Children aren’t happy with nothing to ignore. And that’s what parents were created for.” Ogden Nash

“The joys of parents are secret, and so are their griefs and fears.” Francis Bacon

“There are times when parenthood seems nothing more than feeding the hand that bites you.” Peter De Vries

“The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.” Theodore M. Hesburgh

Possible Sources:


Abstract Topic #6: Hopefulness

According to British novelist, Fay Weldon, “The writers who get the best and most lasting response from readers are those who offer a happy ending through moral development—some kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation, even with self, even at death.” Choose works that have this element of hope. Your goal is to write a carefully reasoned research paper which agrees or disagrees that Americans, at some time in their lives, undergo a spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation” because of an inherent need for hopefulness. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your
topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:
- “Hope is a waking dream.” Aristotle
- “Hope is a good breakfast, but it is a bad supper.” Francis Bacon
- “When hope is taken away from a people, moral degeneration follows swiftly thereafter.” Pearl S. Buck
- “To eat bread without hope is still slowly to starve to death.” Pearl S. Buck
- “Hope costs nothing.” Colette
- “Hope” is the thing with feathers—/That perches on the soul—/And sings the tune without the words—/And never stops—at all—” Emily Dickinson
- “A woman’s hopes are woven of sunbeams; a shadow annihilates them.” George Eliot
- “He that lives upon hope will die fasting.” Benjamin Franklin
- “Hope is generally a wrong guide, though it is very good company by the way.” Lord Halifax
- “Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.” Martin Luther
- “Hope is the struggle of the soul, breaking loose from what is perishable, and attesting her eternity.” Herman Melville
- “Hope springs eternal in the human breast; Man never is, but always (wants) to be blest.” Alexander Pope
- “Our hopes, often though they deceive us, lead us pleasantly along the path of life.” Francois de La Rochefoucauld
- “The miserable have no other medicine/But only hope.” William Shakespeare

Possible Sources:

Abstract Topic #7: Self-Deception/Absurdity
Self-deception is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in many American lives. It consists of assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It can be described as ‘acting according to wish while not
allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts”’. Some would say this behavior is exhibited in all human affairs. Present an argument for or against this assertion. Choose works which emphasize these notions. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:
- “There is nothing so absurd or ridiculous that has not at some time been said by some philosopher.” Oliver Goldsmith
- “The privilege of absurdity; to which no living creature is subject but man only.” Thomas Hobbes
- “It is the height of absurdity to sow little but weeds in the first half of one’s lifetime and expect to harvest a valuable crop in the second half.” Percy Johnston
- “In politics, an absurdity is not a handicap.” Napoleon Bonaparte
- “Almost all absurdity of conduct arises from the imitation of those whom we cannot resemble.” Samuel Johnson
- “The intelligent man finds almost everything ridiculous, the sensible man almost nothing.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
- “We must select the illusion which appeals to our temperament and embrace it with passion if we want to be happy.” Cyril Connolly
- “It is respectable to have no illusions, and safe, and profitable and dull.” Joseph Conrad
- “The task of the real intellectual consists of analyzing illusions in order to discover their causes.” Arthur Miller
- “Don’t part with your illusions. When they are gone you may still exist, but you have ceased to live.” Mark Twain
- “The one person who has more illusions than the dreamer is the man of action.” Oscar Wilde
- “It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.” Virginia Woolf

Possible Sources:

Abstract Topic #8: Freedom and Independence

Based on the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Choose works that address these concepts of independence. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic—to begin to specify the subtopics
that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue—to begin to develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:
- “So live that you can look any man in the eye and tell him to go to hell.” Anonymous
- “The only point in making money is, you can tell some big shot where to go.” Humphrey Bogart
- “No one can build his security upon the nobleness of another person.” Willa Cather
- “Can anything be so elegant as to have few wants, and to serve them one’s self?” Ralph Waldo Emerson
- “[I am] lord of myself, accountable to none.” Benjamin Franklin
- “If money is your hope for independence, you will never have it.” Henry Ford
- “It is easy to be independent when you’ve got money. But to be independent when you haven’t got a thing—that’s the Lord’s test.” Mahalia Jackson
- “I do desire we may be better strangers.” William Shakespeare
- “How happy is he born and taught;/That serveth not another’s will;/Whose armour is his honest thought,/And simple truth his utmost skill.” from The Character of a Happy Life by Sir Henry Wotton

Possible Sources:

**Abstract Topic #9: Knowledge and Wisdom**

“For in much wisdom is much grief, and increase of knowledge is increase of sorrow.” The previous quote comes from the first chapter of Ecclesiastics, a book in the Christian Bible. Choose works that emphasize this idea as it occurs in American life. Your goal is to write a carefully reasoned research paper in which you agree or disagree with the notion that increased knowledge comes with increased sorrow. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopics
that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:

- “All men by nature desire to know.” Aristotle
- “I have tried to know absolutely nothing about a great many things, and I have succeeded fairly well.” Peter Benchley
- “Knowledge is the small part of ignorance that we arrange and classify.” Ambrose Bierce
- “Pocket all your knowledge with your watch and never pull it out in company unless desired.” Lord Chesterfield
- “I do not pretend to know what many ignorant men are sure of.” Clarence Darrow
- “Knowledge is the eye of desire and can become the pilot of the soul.” Will Durant
- “Knowledge slowly builds up what Ignorance in an hour pulls down.” George Eliot
- “Perplexity is the beginning of knowledge.” Kahlil Gibran
- “Mistakes are their own instructors.” Horace
- “If a little knowledge is dangerous, where is the man who has so much as to be out of danger?” Thomas Huxley
- “Every great advance in natural knowledge has involved the absolute rejection of authority” Thomas Huxley
- “I keep six honest serving-men/[They taught me all I knew];/Their names are What and Why and When/And How and Where and Who” Rudyard Kipling
- “To appear to be on the inside and know more than others about what is going on is a great temptation for most people. It is a rare person who is willing to seem to know less than he does.” Eleanor Roosevelt
- “In all affairs, love, religion, politics, or business, it’s a healthy idea, now and then, to hang a question mark on things you have long taken for granted.” Bertrand Russel
- “That which seems the height of absurdity in one generation often becomes the height of wisdom in the next.” John Stuart Mill
- “It is unwise to be too sure of one’s own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.” Mahatma Gandhi
- “One of the greatest pieces of economic wisdom is to know what you do not know.” John Kenneth Galbraith
- “The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.” William James
- “Among mortals second thoughts are wisest.” Euripides
- “The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world’s problems.” Mahatma Gandhi
- “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.” Theodore Roosevelt

Possible Sources:
Berry, Wendall. “The Loss of the University.” Irish Place.
Abstract Topic #10: Language as a Key to Identity

It goes without saying that language is a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity. It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There are times and places when to speak a certain language could be dangerous. Choose works that emphasize these points. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic.

You will: 1) specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:
- “Language. I loved it. And for a long time I would think of myself, of my whole body, as an ear.” Maya Angelou
- “For every man there is something in the vocabulary that would stick to him like a second skin. His enemies have only to find it.” Ambrose Bierce
- “Language is a mixture of statement and evocation.” Elizabeth Bowen
- “Language is the roadmap of a culture. It tells you where its people came from and where they are going.” Rita Mae Brown
- “Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.” Angela Carter
- “I have been a believer in the magic of language since, at a very early age, I discovered that some words got me into trouble and others got me out.” Katherine Dunn
- “Language is a city to the building of which every human being brought a stone.” Ralph Waldo Emerson
- “How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?” E.M. Forster
- “The learned fool writes his nonsense in better language than the unlearned, but it is still nonsense.” Benjamin Franklin
- “Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow.” Oliver Wendell Holmes
- “Thanks to words, we have been able to rise above the brutes, and thanks to words, we have sunk to the level of the demons.” Aldous Huxley
- “If it is true that the violin is the most perfect of musical instruments, then Greek is the violin of human thought.” Helen Keller
- “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” Toni Morrison
• “We defend ourselves with descriptions and tame the world by generalizing.” Iris Murdoch
• “Words are loaded pistols.” Jean-Paul Sarte

Possible Sources:
   Pages 415-430.
Orwell, George. “Politics and the English Language.”
Rodriguez, Richard. A Hunger of Memory.
   Vol. 156 No. 19.

Abstract Topic #11: Money and Class in America
“I think it is fair to say that the current ardor of the American faith in money so easily
surpasses the degrees of intensity achieved by other societies in other times and places.
Money means so many things to us—spiritual as well as temporal—that we are at a loss
to know how to hold its majesty at bay . . . .” Henry Adams in his autobiography remarks
that although the Americans weren’t much good as materialists they had been so
“deflected by the pursuit of money” that they could turn “in no other direction.” The
national distrust of the contemplative temperament arises less from an innate Philistinism
than from a suspicion of anything that can not be counted, stuffed, framed, or mounted
over the fireplace in the den. Choose works that emphasize these ideas. Use the following
quotes to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopics that
verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline
to guide your research.

Quotes:
• “Money is like a sixth sense, and you can’t make use of the other five without it.”
  W. Somerset Maugham
• “The chief value of money lies in the fact that one lives in a world in which it is
  overestimated.” H. L. Mencken
• “Money is not required to buy one necessity of the soul.” Henry David Thoreau
• “Money does all things for reward. Some are pious and honest as long as they
  thrive upon it, but if the devil himself gives better wages, they soon change their
  party.” Seneca
• “He that is of the opinion money will do everything may well be suspected of
  doing everything for money.” Benjamin Franklin
“Never ask of money spent/Where the spender thinks it went/Nobody was ever meant/To remember or invent/What he did with every cent.” Robert Frost

“Put not your trust in money, but put your money in trust.” Oliver Wendell Holmes

“Money often costs too much.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

**Possible Sources:**


Carlyle, Thomas. “For There is a Perennial Nobleness, even Sacredness, in Work.” *From Past and Present* (1843), also on *The College Board Advanced Placement Examination*. 1983.


**Abstract Topic #12: Nature**

Many science and nature writers describe important encounters they have had with unfamiliar aspects of nature. Their changing response to these observations develops a philosophy of respect for nature. For instance, Ralph Waldo Emerson developed this philosophy: “A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and virtue, will purge the eyes to understanding her text.” Choose works that address these concepts being sure to cover the differing philosophies on the same subject. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic—to begin to specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue—to begin to develop a working outline to guide your research.

**Quotes:**

- “I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we only will tune in.” George Washington Carver
- “Man must go back to nature for information.” Thomas Paine
- “Nature does not complete things. She is chaotic. Man must finish, and he does so by making a garden and building a wall.” Robert Frost
- “Nature encourages no looseness, pardons no errors.” Ralph Waldo Emerson
• “All finite things reveal infinitude:/The mountain within its singular bright
shade/Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,/The after-light upon ice-
burdened pines;/Odor of basswood upon a mountain slope,/A scene beloved of
bees;/Silence of water above a sunken tree:/The pure serene of memory of one
man,—/A ripple widening from a single stone/Winding around the waters of the
world.” Theodore Roethke
• “A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of
books.” Walt Whitman
• “Perhaps the truth depends on a walk around the lake.” Wallace Stevens

Possible Sources:
Darwin, Charles. Galapagos Archipelago. The College Board Advanced Placement
Examination. 1990.
Dillard, Annie. Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters. New York:
Melville, Herman. The Encantadas (Enchanted Isles). The College Board Advanced
Placement Examination. 1990.
Library, 1980.

Abstract Topic #13: Passion versus Responsibility
One might argue that man faces a war between passion and responsibility. For example, a
personal cause, a love, a desire for revenge, a determination to redress a wrong, or some
other emotion, may conflict with moral duty. Choose works in which the subject must
confront the demands of a private passion that conflicts with his or her responsibilities.
Your goal is to write a carefully reasoned research paper which explores the nature of this
conflict, its effect on the subjects involved, and its application to the universal human
experience. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1)
specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2)
develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:
• “Passion is the mob of the man, that commits a riot upon his reason.” William
Penn
• “Passion, though a bad regulator, is a powerful spring.” Ralph Waldo Emerson
• “Passion is universal humanity. Without it religion, history, romance and art
would be useless.” Honoré de Balzac
• “Our passions are like convulsion fits, which, though they make us stronger for
the time, leave us the weaker ever after.” Jonathan Swift
“Passion persuades me one way, reason another. I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse.” Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso), *Metamorphoses*, 7. 19-21.

“For passion, be it observed, brings insight with it; it can give a sort of intelligence to simpletons, fools, and idiots, especially during youth.” Honoré De Balzac

Possible Sources:

Abstract Topic #14: Ego, Pride, and Self-Knowledge
Choose works that emphasize how getting to know yourself and living true to that perception is a theme for those works. Your goal is to write a carefully reasoned research paper that analyzes how self-knowledge leads to some kind of happiness, or how the lack of self-knowledge leads to some kind of unhappiness. Use the following quotes to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quotes:
- “This above all to thine own self be true.” Hamlet by William Shakespeare
- “We never know the worth of water ‘til the well is dry.” English Proverb

Possible Sources:
Eisenhower, Dwight D. “Quality of America’s Fighting Men.”
Abstract Topic #15: The Limitations of Society

Some works are written to criticize some limitation implicit in today’s society. Choose works that are critical of what you would define as an American value. Define the value(s), and the common limitation implicit in the works chosen. Analyze how the works respond to or are affected by this similar standard. Your goal is to write a carefully reasoned research paper that argues for or against the validity of the implied criticisms. Use the following quote to establish the scope of your topic. You will: 1) specify the subtopics that verbalize various differing opinions on the same issue, and 2) develop a working outline to guide your research.

Quote:

- “If the talent of ridicule were employed to laugh men out of vice and folly, it might be of some use to the world; but instead of this, we find that it is generally made use of to laugh men out of virtue and good sense, by attacking everything that is solemn and serious, decent and praiseworthy in life.” –Joseph Addison, 1711.

Possible Sources: