

- Demonstrate rhetorical analysis in your own responses to student writing. Comment on how students position their intended audiences and on whether and how they effectively present their cases to these audiences. Teacher responses should give students a sense of how a critical and engaged reader reacts to their arguments. Emphasize the centrality of rhetorical purpose in student writing. Ask students to articulate how they want their texts to affect readers—and to describe those readers precisely (i.e., not “the general public” or “anyone interested in health” but “property owners who use toxic chemicals to maintain the beauty of their lawns.”) Design writing tasks that enable and encourage students to produce purposeful writing in an academic setting. Assign and discuss reading materials that have a real-world purpose.
- If constrained by state or district requirements to teach AP<sup>®</sup> English Language and Composition in conjunction with American or English Literature, look for sections of literary works in which characters or personae use language in an effort to accomplish their purposes in the imaginative realm of the literary text. Use these sections as vehicles for discussing rhetorical practices.

### Question 3

#### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This year’s argument prompt raised the question, “What does it mean to own something?” followed by a brief account of three Western philosophers’ views on ownership. Students were then directed to “think about the differing views of ownership” and to “explain your position on the relationship between ownership and sense of self,” drawing support for their arguments from reading, experience, or observation.

The question was intended to provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate their rhetorical skills by formulating convincing, original arguments — articulating claims and substantiating them with appropriate and sufficient evidence and explanation. The positions taken by Plato, Aristotle, and Sartre on the meaning of “ownership” were provided in the prompt to “jump start” students’ thinking about the abstract concepts they needed to juggle in formulating their arguments: ownership and sense of self. To argue successfully, students needed to ascend to an even higher level of abstraction — to consider the “relationship” between the abstract concepts of ownership and sense of self. By requiring students to think and write at this level of abstraction, the prompt was intended to elicit students’ skills in defining and defending the terms of their arguments; they needed to clarify their understandings of ownership and sense of self as they asserted their positions on how these two concepts are related. While the question demanded abstract thought, successfully defining and explaining the terms of their arguments typically required students to demonstrate the ability to present abstractions in terms of concrete examples and illustrations.

#### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score of this question was 4.35 out of a possible 9 points.

#### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

- **Misreading the prompt:** Students sometimes earned lower-half scores because they misunderstood the kind of argument specified by the prompt—one that asserted and explained a particular relationship between ownership and a sense of identity. Misreadings led some students to agree or disagree with one of the three positions mentioned in the prompt or to formulate a definition of ownership or sense of self without considering the relationship between the two.
- **Exclusively proximal framing of the prompt:** While some students formulated “adequate” responses to the prompt by examining the relationship between ownership and sense of self exclusively within the realm of their own experience (e.g., explaining how ownership of prom dresses, athletic clothing, cars, and cell phones marked high school in-group identity) “effective”

responses usually acknowledged how ownership and sense of identity were connected in the broader, more distal contexts, such as capitalist and communist cultures, or pondered the cultural challenges property ownership poses to environmental policy activists.

- **“Static” arguments:** Static arguments resulted from adherence to a rigid formula for writing an argument based on the five-paragraph theme. These arguments are “static” when all of the examples repeat the same task: supporting the simple thesis. These essays do not “unfold” or “develop” a line of argument, but reassert a single point. Their static nature is especially evident in a conclusion that simply restates the introductory thesis, often verbatim.
- **Assertions without support:** These low-scoring essays tended to introduce multiple assertions with the introductory phrase “I think...” or “I believe...” While these students understood the task of taking a position, they did not distinguish between an opinion and an argument.
- **Inappropriate use of literary examples:** While some students made effective arguments supported primarily by literary examples, many were not able to use this strategy successfully. Literary examples often seemed forced, grounded in questionable readings that failed to develop the student’s position on the relationship between ownership and sense of self. Many students who attempted to use literary examples failed to acknowledge the special status of literary “evidence.”

***Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?***

- Encourage students to read exam prompts carefully. It may help them to annotate the prompts—for instance, underlining imperative verbs and their objects in the prompt in order to identify the crux of the assignment.
- Encourage students to read and learn about the world beyond their immediate sphere of action. Students who know more about the arts, history, science, politics, economics, law, and philosophy do better on the argument question because they have reserves of knowledge to draw from in formulating a response. Encourage students to keep up with news developments around the world. In discussing these events, raise questions about how current events have developed out of the past.
- Help students understand the limitations of the five-paragraph theme. While it is a useful organizing device, it is by no means the only way, nor is it always the best way to structure an essay response. Expose students to a variety of forms—for example, those that accommodate inductive reasoning or implicit argument. The analysis passage in this year’s exam is one such example of an alternative form.
- Emphasize the two-part nature of argument: claim and support. Students need to understand the difference between an opinion (claim only) and an argument (claim and reasons/evidence/appeals). In reading arguments, ask students to identify claims and kinds of support by considering such questions as these: What does this writer want me to accept as right or true? Why does this writer think I should accept this claim? Students also need practice in selecting appropriate support when making an argument for a given purpose and audience.
- Teachers who are required to combine the teaching of AP® English Language and Composition with the teaching of literature should make sure their students understand the special status of imaginative literature as support for real-world claims. While literary works may illustrate values, moral dilemmas, character traits, etc., they reflect or question cultural norms obliquely. Literary works are cultural artifacts, not empirical reports or “true” representations of human behavior. They are useful to illustrate or raise questions, but they do not map directly onto reality.