RETHINKING AP ENGLISH

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In the vast rooms of a convention center (now in Kansas City, previously in Louisville), more than a thousand high school and college English teachers from all over the United States come together each June for a week of reading of the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition exam's free response essays from thousands of high school students. I have been a reader for many years, and have lately been promoted to the ranks of table leaders. Table leaders are experienced readers who lead tables of eight or nine readers. We provide guidance and support, do early second readings of all readers and generally are responsible for maintaining work flow, order and consistency in the scoring of student work. We also arrive at the reading session a day early to read and discuss sample papers in our assigned question, get to know one another, and prepare to work with our tables of readers for the week.

Recently, for the first time in more than ten years of reading the AP, I was assigned to read the synthesis question. This relatively new type of question requires students to read a set of 6-8 short source materials, including at least one visual such as a chart, graph, photo or other material, and respond to an essay prompt by using at least three of the sources in some way to support their ideas (see Appendix A for a sample question). The training provided by AP requires that leaders and readers buy into this approach and apply the scoring guide we are given in a fair and consistent fashion. In other words, we don't have to agree with the guidelines but must apply them as consistently as possible in the holistic scoring of students' work. Readers are trained on sample papers on the first day of the reading and repeatedly re-trained throughout the week. Table leaders are given daily statistical reports on readers' scoring so that they can monitor

performance and provide feedback as needed to improve readers' consistency and adherence to the scoring guide.

Because I have focused my research and publications on college students' critical reading and am aware of the serious weaknesses in their reading abilities as a by-product of this work, I was somewhat taken aback by the expectations AP has for the use of sources in the synthesis essay on the exam. Admittedly, students have less than an hour to read the sources and write this essay, along with two other essays in the two-hour free response portion of the test. And this part follows an hour of multiple-choice questions on grammar, style, and rhetorical analysis, so the test is a challenging mental workout. On the other hand, the idea that just "mentioning" a source puts a paper in the upper half did give me pause. Over the week of the recent reading session on the synthesis question, I had an increasing feeling of dis-ease and dissatisfaction with AP's approach to reading and using sources. While the AP English Language *course* is now more focused on critical reading, the exam still sends a message that the most superficial kind of reading can give students high test scores that allow them to skip coursework that might help them develop a full array of critical literacy skills.

I have a niggling feeling that something is not quite right about what is going on with AP English Language and its purportedly equivalent first-year writing course(s) at many institutions around the country. I know I am not alone in this concern. The AP English Language exam has grown by leaps and bounds: in 2015, there were more than 527,000 English Language exams taken, up from about 156,000 exams in 2002 (College Board, *AP*). This growth alone and the related amount of money being spent by individual students, school districts, states and the federal government to pay for or support AP exams are cause for concern in and of themselves. But at least two recent studies raise many other issues, such as the inequity in the population of students taking AP courses and exams (Nao) and the varied and inconsistent ways that AP is used when students apply and enroll at colleges and universities across the country (Sadler, Sonnert,

Tai, & Klopfenstein). That niggling feeling I have that something is not right with AP is shared by others who have studied the whole system in detail and is supported by careful studies of what happens to students once they take an AP course and exam (Hansen et al., Nao, Puhr).

In the case of the English Language and Composition exam, it's not just the growth, equity and other issues that are worrisome; it's what the exams look like and the scoring expectations on the synthesis question. In particular, it's the message that students can get high scores without doing careful, critical, thoughtful reading and writing that will be required for success in college and beyond. Today's AP is not the AP you may remember from your own high school experience. Indeed, you may not have taken the AP English Language and Composition course or exam, as it did not start until 1980 according to the College Board website (College Board, *English Description*). While I am totally in favor of any student taking an AP class and being challenged by the curriculum and writing requirements, I have grave misgivings about the exam and the credit/placement being offered as a by-product.

There is good evidence that even students who do well on the AP English Language and Composition exam should take first-year writing in college (Hansen et al., "An Argument;" "Are Advanced"); moreover, there is good evidence that neither the AP English Language course nor the first-year writing courses it purports to supplant do enough to develop students' skills in critical literacy. Hansen and her co-authors did two studies looking at the writing of 182 college sophomores in courses beyond first-year writing. They compared those who had taken both AP English (either Lang or Lit) and first-year composition and found that these students performed significantly better than those who had either experience alone. Moreover, they recommended that advanced *placement* (i.e., not credit or course waivers) be granted only for AP English scores of 4 or 5, not 3, as students scoring a 3 did not do as well as those earning the top scores. These findings support my own studies of reading, which

show that a key weakness in the current first-year writing curriculum and exam—AP or otherwise—is its lack of a deep and careful focus on the development of critical reading and literacy skills needed by students in college, in their professional lives, and for their full participation in our democratic society.

While AP courses and the English Language and Composition exam provide a start toward helping students develop the strong reading skills they will need in the future, there is much more AP could be doing to prepare students for the critical literacy essential to success in and out of school. Realistically, neither the College Board nor most colleges and universities are going to stop offering and accepting the AP English Language course and exam. However, they should all see that AP courses are preparation, not a replacement, for college writing courses. While the course helps students with reading to some extent, the exam suggests that quick reading of short texts with little analysis is enough to earn a high score. Teaching students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, use, and document source materials with integrity is essential to the substantive development of their critical literacy. For this reason and a number of others related to the nature and development of academic critical literacy, both the College Board and colleges need to rethink the shape and use of the AP Language course and especially, the exam.

The case for this claim rests on several key points. First, a close look at the current AP Language course and exam as well as its typical administration and scoring will make clear how students take the course and test and how it is commonly used. To be fair, a few of the concerns that arise from the current course are addressed by AP's new Capstone program, but that program is too new (begun 2014) to solve the larger problems of critical reading and literacy; moreover, students must still complete four exams to earn AP's Capstone Diploma, so the exam itself is still a problem. Once the course and exam are thoroughly discussed, I will present a clear definition of academic critical literacy which will establish the goal that students should be meeting, regardless of what course(s) they take or when and where they take them.

From a different perspective, the field of composition studies has made clear the knowledge and skills students should have through reports and position statements, so it is useful to look at what those say and how well the AP Language program develops them in the course and measures them on the test. In addition, the major professional organization in the field has made explicit in a recent position statement how high school work in college writing should be treated. This discussion will reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the AP Language program in meeting students' need to develop academic critical literacy. Finally, this detailed review of the program and its uses leads to specific and pragmatic suggestions for ways that colleges might make better use of students' AP experiences.

AP Course and Exam—Standard Practice

The AP program works differently in each location, but in general, these are typical features. First, students can take AP courses if their high school offers them and then may choose whether or not to take the exam associated with each course. They can also take any AP exam whether or not they have taken the related course, simply by registering and paying the required fee. Some school districts may encourage or require that students take the exam if they have taken the course; districts may get "credit" for having a certain number of students take AP exams when they are evaluated under "No Child Left Behind" or other evaluation schemes. For AP English Lang (or AP Lang as most high school and college teachers who work as readers usually refer to it), the AP program requires teachers to submit syllabi for an audit to certify that the course offered meets AP's criteria (College Board, *AP Course Audit*). Audits are conducted by the staff of the AP program and by experienced AP teachers (*AP Course Audit*). Some skepticism about the audit process is discussed by Hansen and Farris, authors of *College Credit for Writing in High School*, which examines the larger issues of critical literacy from the varied perspectives of high school and college teachers and administrators. Among the chapters in this book, Hansen's

opening chapter notes that the audit process is relatively superficial, especially when compared to the professional and rigorous evaluation of courses and student work required by the International Baccalaureate program (Hansen 23-24).

Colleges and universities, for their part, set their own rules institutionally or often by department for acceptable scores and the granting of placement or credit based on course equivalencies. A number of different policies and practices exist and there is a lot of variation among institutions. For a quick sample, I looked at current policies at a handful of Michigan colleges and universities including my own institution, Oakland University, University of Michigan and a private school, Hope College, plus a few others. Some accept a score of 3 and grant 3 or 4 credits but most require a score of 4 or 5 to grant credit. Generally, though, students will almost always receive credit for scores of 4 or 5 (the top scores). Few if any grant credit or advanced placement for scores lower than 3. Of the seventeen states with state-wide or system-wide policies posted on the AP website, none offers credit for scores below 3 (College Board, *AP Higher Ed*). According to College Board data, 3200 colleges and universities accept the AP Lang score in some way, granting credit or advanced placement (College Board, *AP Program*). The exam has grown over time as mentioned previously and is now the largest course and exam in the AP program, with more than 527,000 exams taken in 2015 (College Board, *AP Program*). For this reason along with many other more substantive concerns, the overall approach to AP Lang warrants rethinking.

AP Lang—A Closer Look at the Course

A closer look at the course, the exam and its scoring may be helpful in exploring why a rethinking is needed. There is a thorough description of the AP Lang course and exam on the College Board's website. Part of the site is called "AP Central;" it is an area for the public and professionals that includes course descriptions and other materials for faculty and administrators. The following discussion draws on the AP Lang official public

course description, effective 2014 (the most recent revision), per the website (College Board, *English Description*). The main goals of the course appear in Appendix A; they focus on critical literacy needed for success in college and for civic engagement. It is worth noting that this updated goal statement is a strong revision of earlier goal statements from AP, a definite step in the right direction. Students are expected to read many different kinds of prose materials from different time periods and different disciplines, as well as electronic texts. The revised course goals specifically include these points about reading:

- Writing expository, analytical, and argumentative compositions based on readings representing a variety of prose styles and genres
- Reading nonfiction (e.g., essays, journalism, science writing, autobiographies, criticism) selected to give students opportunities to identify and explain an author's use of rhetorical strategies and techniques
- Developing research skills and the ability to evaluate, use, and cite primary and secondary sources
- Conducting research and writing argument papers in which students present an argument of their own that includes the analysis and synthesis of ideas from an array of sources (College Board, *AP English Language Course Overview*)

Two AP teachers shared their syllabi and assignments for this course with me at my request. The first of these (Teacher A) is a woman who teaches at a private high school in the south. The students served by this school come from an upper middle class population and generally go on to attend top-ranked, highly competitive colleges and universities around the country. This teacher has scored the AP Lang exam for many years and is thoroughly familiar with it. The second teacher (Teacher B) works at a public high school in an upper middle class community in the Midwest. The students served by this school also go on to attend

prestigious colleges and universities across the country. The school district is considered a high-performing national exemplary district in the US (National Blue Ribbon Schools). This instructor has not scored the exam, but he has years of experience with the course.

An excerpt of Teacher A's syllabus for the AP Lang appears in Appendix B. This course was submitted to AP for review as part of its audit process (*AP Course Audit*), and satisfied AP's requirements. The course includes extensive readings (lists omitted for the sake of space) including both literary genres of various types and nonfiction prose. Students have ample opportunities to develop the academic critical literacy skills discussed below. Students with experience in this course should have no difficulty with the prompts on the exam, also discussed below. However, to the extent that these teachers teach "to the test," the reading tasks and skills may not provide the students with a full set of critical skills. Teacher A's synthesis assignment appears in Appendix C. She explained to me (personal communication, July 8, 2013) that this assignment is the first of a series of steps that will take several months to unfold. Students will move ahead by actually reading the sources they've found and then learn to integrate them into their papers and cite them appropriately. As students begin to work with their sources, they are also working on vocabulary and building other critical reading skills and abilities.

A similar portion of Teacher B's syllabus for AP Lang appears in Appendix D and his assignment for the synthesis research project appears in Appendix E. It is important to note that he has divided the course into specific sections, and each has a different focus for the students' reading and writing work. I have omitted the resources and reading lists for each segment in the interest of space, but it is clear that this course focuses on both reading and writing and that students are being taught the relevant skills in analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application. Like Teacher A's syllabus, this course syllabus was submitted to AP for review in its audit process and satisfied AP's requirements (bear in mind the

critique of the audit process noted by Hansen, discussed earlier). These samples demonstrate that the course can give the students substantial experience with reading and writing. They show that teachers do generally work with students to analyze readings for main ideas, engage in style analysis using their understanding of rhetorical tools and techniques, evaluate each source, and synthesize as demonstrated in their assignment requirements. They also do focused work on vocabulary development, again as illustrated in their syllabi. The problem isn't with the course or with what teachers do.

The problem is with the stated goals of the course, notwithstanding the recent improved description, and especially with the test and what students need to do to score well on it; a good summary of the requirements and scoring appears in the test prep book *5 Steps to a 5* by Murphy and Rankin. It should be clear that the problem is that even though the course gives students a start on these basic skills, the more extensive critical literacy skills are not there when AP Lang students appear in college, as shown by the work of Hansen et al. ("An Argument;" "Are Advanced") to be discussed below. To see why, a closer look at the exam itself is needed.

AP Lang—A Closer Look at the Exam

The exam includes an hour-long multiple choice section, in which students examine passages and answer questions about structure, style, rhetorical features and related topics. The rest of the test runs for two hours and fifteen minutes, and consists of the three free response questions. These questions fall into clear categories: the first is generally referred to as the synthesis question, which entails reading and using six to eight sources provided in the exam booklet, each of which is less than a page in length. The other two are a rhetorical analysis question and an argument question. The rhetorical analysis question typically presents a passage of text (for example, the first time I scored the AP Lang exam, the passage was Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address) and asks students to discuss the rhetorical strategies used

by the writer. The argument question states an issue or topic, asks students to take a position and defend that position with evidence from readings, observation, personal experience or other sources. The students have fifteen minutes to read the sources for the synthesis question, and then two hours to write all three essays. A typical synthesis question is provided on the AP Central site, as follows:

> (Suggested time — 40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)
>
> The United States Postal Service (USPS) has delivered communications for more than two centuries. During the nineteenth century, the USPS helped to expand the boundaries of the United States by providing efficient and reliable communication across the country. Between 1790 and 1860 alone, the number of post offices in the United States grew from 75 to over 28,000. With this growth came job opportunities for postal workers and a boom in the cross-country rail system. The twentieth century brought substantial growth to the USPS, including large package delivery and airmail. Over the past decade, however, total mail volume has decreased considerably as competition from electronic mail and various package delivery companies has taken business away from the USPS. The loss of revenue has prompted the USPS to consider cutting back on delivery days and other services. Carefully read the following seven sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then synthesize information from at least three of the sources and incorporate it into a coherent, well-developed essay that argues a clear position on whether the USPS should be restructured to meet the needs of a changing world, and if so, how. Make sure your argument is central; use the sources to illustrate and support your reasoning. Avoid merely summarizing the sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from,

whether through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You may cite the sources as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the descriptions in parentheses.

Source A (Stone)
Source B (graph)
Source C (O'Keefe)
Source D (Hawkins)
Source E (McDevitt)
Source F (Cullen)
Source G (photo) (College Board, *AP Central*, 2012 exam)

Note that students are advised not to resort to summary of the sources but are directed to synthesize and make use of them in support of their argument.

The sample syllabi suggest that at least some instructors make a real effort to help students build the skills they need to respond to the synthesis question appropriately. But the test itself and its scoring do not really require or draw on whatever skills students might have developed in their AP Lang class. And the test certainly does not call for students to demonstrate that they can analyze, evaluate, synthesize and apply information from readings to support an argument. There are three specific reasons why the exam itself falls short. First, the test provides students with six or eight sources, but not one of these is more than one page long. There's no way to tell from the responses whether students could follow an extended argument of more than a page. Second, the test does not ask students to evaluate the source materials, to question their authority, accuracy, currency, relevancy, appropriateness and bias (the Association of College and Research Librarians' criteria for evaluation of source materials (ACRL)). Finally, the test does not ask students specifically to put the sources into conversation with one another, the sort of synthesis expected in college and professional writing.

This last point warrants further discussion. The scoring guide for the 2012 synthesis question states that "For the purposes of

scoring, synthesis means using sources to develop a position and citing them accurately" (College Board, *English Scoring Guidelines*). The scoring guidelines for 2015 have not changed substantively from those of 2012 or prior years. Papers that get top scores need to synthesize any three of the sources, using this definition of synthesis. Naturally, readers will look at how the sources are used, but the AP scoring guidelines do not explicitly require analysis, synthesis in the sense of considering the sources in relation to one another and the writer's point, or evaluation of the sources. Thus, the test does not require or measure students' abilities in academic critical literacy as defined in more detail below, including using what they get from reading. And while this level of expectation may be beyond the abilities of high school students, the intention is that AP Lang replace a college-level writing course, where these are the expectations. So it is appropriate to expect students in AP to be able to meet these same goals. If they cannot, then re-thinking how AP Lang is used is definitely in order.

Specifically, the scoring guide for the top scores says:

> 9 Essays earning a score of 9 meet the criteria for a score of 8 and, in addition, are especially sophisticated in their argument, thorough in development, or impressive in their control of language.
>
> 8 Effective Essays earning a score of 8 effectively develop a position on whether the USPS should be restructured to meet the needs of a changing world, and if so, how. They develop their position by effectively synthesizing at least three of the sources. The evidence and explanations used are appropriate and convincing. Their prose demonstrates a consistent ability to control a wide range of the elements of effective writing but is not necessarily flawless.
>
> For the purposes of scoring *synthesis* means using sources to develop a position and citing them accurately. (College Board, *English Scoring Guidelines*)

Here are the opening two paragraphs from an essay in response to the prompt above that was scored as an 8 or 9 by AP:

> In a fast-pace [sic] society of sleek innovations and modern new technologies, it can be easy to get lost in the hype of popular new gadgets and trends while if not forgetting, moving away from the traditions and enterprises that were so vital to the United States as a developing country. One of these pioneering enterprises, the United States Postal Service (USPS), has become a casualty of the innovation we laud so highly. While we should not discount the progress made in the past decades that has facilitated a transition to faster and sleeker technologies, it is also paramount that we support and maintain traditions and symbols of the American dream like the USPS by applying modern principles and revamping the company's image and organization.
>
> The United States Postal Service not only serves to deliver mail, get money orders and set up P.O. boxes, but also to remain a symbol of our countries [sic] development and progress (Doc. D). It serves to remind the US population of where our country has been and can give citizens a feeling of pride that can be matched by few other countries. With this reminder of where we have been comes a respect for the traditions of our ancestors. Cullen argues, "E-mail is fast and simple, but to me an old-fashioned, handwritten letter has value in this speed-obsessed world." (Doc F). While new technology and trends come and go, a personal touch and sentimental value gives the USPS value more profound than speed or ease. Hawkins agrees, "It's nice to sometimes get a personally written letter in the mail…nothing replaces a personally written letter to an old friend. It gives the message a more intimate feeling" (Doc D). The USPS represents more than a graph of profit or delivery points. It represents a long standing tradition that unites Americans.

(College Board, *English Scoring Guidelines,* sample response; the full text is available at AP Central)

Notice that the writer relies on quotes which, while they do support the point being made, require little analysis or synthesis. In fact, the writer mentions the sources without probing them at all. The scoring of this paper points to the chief weakness in the AP *exam*: it sends a message that this kind of reading and use of materials is sufficient to get the top score. From the students' perspective, it is hard to see why academic critical literacy is a crucial goal, when this response is good enough to get a top score.

As noted, there are a number of critiques of the AP Lang course and exam; in part perhaps in response to some of this criticism, AP has created a relatively new program called AP Capstone. It involves 2 new courses, AP Seminar and AP Research, each of which requires extended research, reading and written work. The Seminar course is prerequisite to the Research course and each culminates in a test that entails writing under timed conditions. These courses go through an audit process, surely similar to that required for AP Lang, with the same concerns noted above. It is not clear from the Capstone website how the exam is scored, but the teacher evaluates the students' work at the end of each of the classes. To qualify for an "AP Diploma," students must complete both courses and exams successfully (i.e., score 3 or higher) and also take four AP exams. If students complete only the Seminar and Research components of the Capstone program, scores of 3 will yield an "AP Certificate" (College Board, *AP Capstone*). This program certainly appears to be a step in the right direction in terms of developing students' critical literacy skills, but it is too new (started in 2014) to assess whether it develops the reading and writing abilities students need, and it still hinges on yet another test. It does expand AP's array of tests and fees for sure.

Although the new Capstone program appears to move in the right direction in terms of helping students develop their critical literacy skills, the continuing use of tests that entail superficial

reading of short texts does not help achieve this goal. As a practical matter, it is hard to imagine any kind of timed test that would work appropriately for this purpose. Reading, and especially the kind of critical reading required in college and beyond cannot easily be tested in an AP-type test of a few hours. Other kinds of instruments (like those used in the Capstone courses) can provide a much better indication of students' abilities as can performance in college courses where critical literacy is an integrated part of the curriculum. The point of this detailed critique of the current AP Lang course and test is to make the case for this integration.

It should be clear from this extended discussion that while the AP Lang course works appropriately to help students begin to develop critical literacy skills, the test suggests that the most superficial reading is ample. High test scores do not reflect students' abilities to analyze, synthesize, evaluate and use reading material to support their ideas in an argument. This goal is the one higher education aims for in courses and requirements. A consensus on this goal in some form appears clearly from a chorus of voices: my own research with experts, the outcomes developed by writing program administrators across the country, the College Board's own research arm, the competing test organization, ACT, and from colleges themselves as well as the National Council of Teachers of English, the major professional organization of English teachers, both K-12 and college level. These voices together suggest, albeit in different ways, that AP Lang and the use of the exam should be re-thought.

A Key Goal: Academic Critical Literacy

One of the substantive reasons for examining the use of AP carefully lies in a definition of academic critical literacy, the explicit or implicit goal of all college reading and writing courses. The definition that follows is one that I created after completing and reporting on a series of case studies of the similarities and differences among eight novice and five expert readers (*Reading, Writing*). The experts were all academics with PhDs who regularly

read and write complex texts. The novices were all college students. Here is the specific definition of the critical literacy of the experts I studied, created to state a clear goal teachers need to work for with student novices:

> Academic critical literacy is best defined as the psycholinguistic processes of getting meaning from or putting meaning into print and/or sound, images, and movement, on a page or screen, used for the purposes of analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application; these processes develop through formal schooling and beyond it, at home and at work, in childhood and across the lifespan and are essential to human functioning in a democratic society. (*Reading, Writing* 41)

In setting this definition, I intended to capture both reading and writing and to capture the fact that to an increasing degree, literate activities occur not only on pages but also on screens. My definition or description of what students should know and be able to do is certainly not the only one available, but it arises from my direct observation of expert readers and specifies the goal students need to meet in order to succeed in college, in their careers, and in their professional lives.

The field of composition studies has presented a number of definitions that are also relevant to this discussion. Probably one of the most widely-accepted statements of what students should know and be able to do at the end of first-year writing comes from a document created by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, usually referred to as the *WPA Outcomes* (CWPA). The CWPA is a nationwide organization for those who oversee writing programs in colleges and universities. The *Outcomes* document was originally developed in 2000 and most recently amended in 2014. As I have argued elsewhere ("Enhancing," forthcoming), one section of the *Outcomes* is especially relevant to the present discussion, and that is the section on "Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing" which reads as follows:

By the end of first-year composition, students should:

- Use composing and reading for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in various rhetorical contexts
- Read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence, to patterns of organization, to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and to how these features function for different audiences and situations
- Locate and evaluate (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, timeliness, bias and so on) primary and secondary research materials, including journal articles and essays, books, scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks and internet sources
- Use strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer's ideas with those from appropriate sources (WPA *Outcomes*)

The idea of the *Outcomes* document was to provide a kind of template that colleges and universities could adapt to their own individual campuses and needs, rather than a single set of standards. This document has been widely used by college writing programs around the country, and is often cited as a useful starting point for discussions of the goals students may be expected to meet in composition courses. This newly-revised *Outcomes* section now goes much farther than it did initially in specifying the reading abilities students should have, providing a solid baseline of synthesis and evaluation of sources for use in writing. It also fits well with the definition of academic critical literacy presented above.

Yet another definition or description of the goal we are all trying to achieve comes from AP itself, which offers its own definition of critical literacy in the Course Description document for AP Lang. This description was revised and updated in 2014.

The section of the course description on research is especially relevant in this connection. It makes the following key points:

> …the informed use of research materials and the ability to *synthesize* varied sources (to *evaluate, use and cite* sources) are integral parts of the AP English Language and Composition course. Students move past assignments that allow for the uncritical citation of sources and, instead, take up projects that call on them *to evaluate the legitimacy and purpose* of sources used. One way to help students *synthesize and evaluate* their sources in this way is the researched argument paper.
>
> Research helps students to formulate varied, informed arguments. Unlike the traditional research paper, in which works are often summarized but not evaluated or used to support the writer's own ideas, the researched argument requires students to consider each source as a text that was itself written for a particular audience and purpose. Researched argument papers remind students that they must sort through disparate interpretations to *analyze, reflect upon, and write* about a topic. When students are asked to bring the experience and opinions of others into their essays in this way, they enter into conversations with other writers and thinkers. The results of such conversations are essays that use citations for substance rather than show, for dialogue rather than diatribe. (College Board, *English Description* 8-9, excerpted, emphasis added)

The course description, it should be clear, asks teachers to develop students' skills in analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and use of materials quite specifically in the course goals. All the key words or ideas are in the description as my added emphasis makes clear. However, it is important to note that the description of course outcomes is not strongly focused on reading and research or on the essential skills of critical literacy. It focuses almost entirely on students' writing abilities. The list includes twelve

outcomes and only one of these mentions "arguments based on readings" (College Board, *English Description* 10; see Appendix A). In addition, the outcomes mention analysis only twice and synthesis not at all. And even if teachers emphasize this kind of work (which they do, as illustrated by syllabi discussed earlier), the exam sends a different and much more superficial message about the skills that are needed.

The College Board's research offices have developed a very detailed reading competency assessment model that provides a definition of reading useful to this discussion. The "Cognitively Based Assessment *of, for* and *as* Learning" reading competency model offers the following description of some of the essential reading skills beyond being able to decode written text:

> Model building skill is the collection of abilities that allows one to construct meaning from either decoded text or spoken language. This skill set includes all of the skills needed to construct meaning from words (vocabulary), sentences, paragraphs, and the overall discourse structure of text. Model building involves the ability to locate and retrieve information (literal comprehension) as well as the ability to infer and generalize unstated relationships within text. Both the literal and inferential levels of text processing help the reader to construct a mental model of a text's meaning. A mental model is a structured representation of the literal and implied meaning of text. It includes the ability to chunk, organize, and summarize information. …Applied comprehension skill is the ability to use the information contained in text or spoken language for some particular purpose. Applied comprehension involves going beyond the literal and inferential interpretation of text or spoken language in order to use the information to achieve a particular goal (e.g., solve a problem, make a decision, create a presentation or Web site). Applied comprehension in the CBAL model is broken down into three types of reading: reading that requires integrating and synthesizing

> information from multiple sources; reading that involves reasoning, explaining, and generating explanations by integrating new information with relevant background knowledge; and reading that requires application of critical thinking skills to evaluate text contents (evaluate/critique). (O'Reilly and Sheehan 5)

It's worth noting that the CBAL model specifically integrates analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating and using reading materials for particular purposes. These are the key elements in the definition of academic critical literacy proposed above.

Finally, because what is at issue here is the ability of high school students as they are being taught and assessed by the AP Lang exam, it is worth looking at how the other major testing organization defines reading and literacy skills. So, the last definition useful to this discussion comes from the ACT. The ACT exam, taken by thousands of students every year, is not by any means a perfect instrument: it is a timed, paper-and-pencil multiple choice test (though it has in recent years added a writing sample as well). It does, however, have a section specifically devoted to reading in which students have 35 minutes to read four short passages of text and answer 10 multiple choice questions on each passage. A thorough study of student performance on the Reading portion of the ACT released in 2006 shows that only about half of 563,000 students tracked over three years earn a score of 21 or better (scale is 0-36), and are successful in college, where success is defined as a 2.0 GPA and returning for a second year of college. ACT specifies quite precisely the abilities it is measuring, a functional definition of students' abilities with complex texts, as follows, using the mnemonic RSVP:

> Relationships:
> Interactions among ideas or characters in the text are subtle, involved, or deeply embedded.
> Richness:

> The text possesses a sizable amount of highly sophisticated information conveyed through data or literary devices.
> Structure:
> The text is organized in ways that are elaborate and sometimes unconventional.
> Style:
> The author's tone and use of language are often intricate.
> Vocabulary:
> The author's choice of words is demanding and highly context dependent.
> Purpose:
> The author's intent in writing the text is implicit and sometimes ambiguous. (ACT, *Reading* 17)

Only half the students in the 2006 study were able to perform well on these aspects of reading; more recent results in 2015 show a decline in these skills, such that only 46% of students hit ACT's benchmark score (ACT, "Condition"). Moreover, the ACT's definition of "success" is quite limited; the organization does not make any claims about the desirable outcome of attainment, i.e., college completion.

And tests, in any case, have many weaknesses. Because no standardized test can fairly and thoroughly represent students' abilities, a different kind of qualitative measure provides further insight. Students' reading difficulties as they read and write research papers are reflected in the findings of the Citation Project, a major study of first-year writing. After reviewing about 2000 student citations to published work in papers written at schools and colleges across the country, Jamieson and Howard found that only 6% of the citations entail substantive summary of the source, and most papers mention a source only once and usually draw from the first page or two of the material used (Jamieson and Howard). These findings suggest that students typically do not read source materials thoroughly and are generally unable to go beyond summary if they get that far.

Finally, it is useful to understand how the synthesis question was developed in the context of the foregoing exploration of the critical reading and literacy issue. In *College Credit for Writing in High School*, Hansen and Farris have one chapter that is most pertinent to the issues under discussion, Kathleen Puhr's "The Evolution of AP English Language and Composition," which details the development of AP Lang over the last ten years or so. Puhr makes clear the connection between the recent changes in AP Lang and the work of the AP Test Development Committee (of which she was a member) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the national organization for those who direct college writing programs. The two groups worked together beginning in 2002 (Puhr 73) to add the synthesis question to the AP Lang exam. They also worked to develop the course, adding a stronger focus on rhetoric as well as the audit now used to review syllabi for the course.

Puhr points out that the AP Lang course is typically offered to high school juniors, integrated into American literature as a standard part of the curriculum. As a result, the course has a literary rather than a rhetorical focus with much less emphasis on nonfiction prose than is needed to develop the kinds of skills that are the focus of typical first-year composition courses. In a helpful table (Puhr 77), she shows how the WPA *Outcomes* statement fits together with the AP Lang course outcomes. However, she notes that not all AP courses offer or achieve these goals, for three main reasons: the mix of AP Lang with American literature, unprepared students taking the course, and unprepared teachers teaching it (Puhr 79). These various problems have led the CWPA organization to issue a position statement concerning pre-college writing courses including AP, the International Baccalaureate program (IB) and various kinds of dual or concurrent credit schemes (Hansen et al. *CWPA Position*).

The position statement specifically recommends that the AP Lang *course* can be an extremely valuable experience that prepares students for college writing. However, the English tests (both AP Lang and AP Lit) may not be "valid indicators that students are

prepared to bypass FYW [first-year writing] and [the CWPA organization] does not recommend that students take AP English tests in order to try to exchange their AP scores for FYW credit" (Hansen et al., *CWPA Position* 6-7). The problem with this position is that at a number of institutions, AP scores of 3 waive one first-year composition course, and scores of 4 or 5 waive two courses. Moreover, while elite private institutions can choose not to accept AP scores, many public institutions cannot make this choice lest they lose enrollment, since students and parents are looking for ways to shorten time to degree and limit costs in the face of the ever-increasing cost of college. If the goal is to produce a highly literate citizenry as Hansen et al. suggest (*CWPA Position* 12), waiving college composition courses based on AP test scores is not the best way to reach this goal. Indeed, a detailed study in 2010 of students whose high school class focused on the rhetorical analysis question of the AP exam showed that students improved their scores on that question, but did not achieve the goals that WPAs consider most important in first-year writing courses as discussed above in the section on the WPA *Outcomes* document, notably synthesis and evaluation (Warren).

From this review of definitions of reading and literacy and various attempts to measure or assess students' abilities, two points should be clear. First, the definition of academic critical literacy proposed at the start of this section captures a consensus of definitions from a variety of sources in the field. Second, although the College Board encourages the development of these skills in its expectations for AP Lang courses, it sends a different message with a test that entails the most superficial kind of reading. Despite the addition of visual material to the synthesis question prompt, and despite the requirement that students use the sources to support their argument, the AP Lang exam does not demand the academic critical literacy students will need for academic, professional and personal success. While AP will surely continue to offer the AP Lang exam, and while colleges will surely to continue to accept it in various ways, the recent statement put out by the CWPA organization makes clear that better approaches

to AP are needed to serve students' need for a full array of critical literacy skills in college and beyond. Again, the CWPA position statement makes clear that the *course* does provide students with useful beginning preparation in academic critical literacy, but the exam sends a distinctly different message.

What to Do? Making Better Use of AP

Given the problems with AP in general and with AP Lang in particular, what needs to happen? How can college and university faculty address these issues, especially since it is unlikely that institutions are going to stop accepting AP credit?

There are a number of ways that postsecondary faculty and institutions can create more appropriate responses to and uses of the AP Lang exam. First, high school AP teachers need to be more fully prepared to teach the AP Lang course; AP has recognized this need and has attempted to address it with regular workshops and in-service training for AP teachers around the US, but stronger preparation particularly in the teaching of writing and rhetorical skills is needed as well. This point has been made by my colleague and long-time AP reader, table leader, and consultant Ron Sudol, professor emeritus at Oakland University. For their part, colleges and universities, as I have suggested, also need to offer focused instruction in critical reading and thinking skills in every course across the curriculum, to go with widespread writing across the curriculum ("Reading Across the Curriculum").

In addition to these steps, English departments and writing programs might consider different ways of making use of students' AP Lang exam results, especially in ways that Ed White, a national expert in writing assessment, has argued should be tied to the courses and expectations of the local program of the institution the students attend (White 140-41). The studies by Hansen et al. discussed earlier show that AP English should be used for advanced *placement,* not for credit. Students submitting AP Lang results might be required to take a more advanced writing course and to demonstrate success in that course before credit is granted, with a minimum score of 3. They might be asked to submit a

portfolio of work done for their AP Lang course before credit is granted, regardless of the exam result, since that would allow college instructors to see the work that they did and assess the critical reading and writing preparation students have. A college or university might devise its own instrument that would measure academic critical literacy skills as I have defined them here and require students to demonstrate their skills through that instrument before accepting AP credit.

These approaches would allow for some kind of direct assessment of the skills students should have from AP Lang. In many institutions, each department is able to set its own requirements for the use of AP and in such institutions, these options would move toward a more substantive examination of students' ability levels. These ideas are supported by an NCTE Research Policy Brief issued in 2013 (Gere). The overall idea here is that the critical reading and literacy goals students need to achieve cannot be developed in a single course or measured by a single test. Any approach that helps students to develop their abilities to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and use information and ideas they get from reading can and should be applied over time and over a variety of courses and a variety of disciplines. (I am grateful to *JTW* reader Deborah Rossen-Knill for her guidance in clarifying this point.)

Institutions can also help students develop their reading and critical literacy skills by setting their policies differently. They could, for example, grant students AP credit for scores of 4 or 5, but require that students complete some or all of the required course sequence in first-year writing or in upper-level or gen ed writing intensive courses in addition to their AP work. A different approach would consider the AP Lang course as satisfying a pre-requisite or offer credit as for elective courses. Yet another possibility would be for institutions to offer only partial credit (say two credits instead of four) and then only students who take and pass another course with a C or better would receive this credit toward their degrees. Any or all of these strategies would allow institutions to continue to accept AP courses for credit in some

form, but make clear the importance of students developing skills in academic critical literacy.

AP Lang is a good starting point, but its focus on academic critical literacy is limited, at least in terms of the message sent by the exam itself. The course itself, as my high school colleagues' syllabi show, does a good job in beginning the development of the relevant skills. The problems with the AP program at large and particularly with the AP Lang exam are based on evidence from a number of different sources. Not only do education scholars and critics have concerns about AP, but so do those most directly affected by AP Lang, college writing teachers. The lately revised goals of the course, moreover, still do not fully address the academic critical literacy my research shows that novice readers need, and the test does not measure their development. For all these reasons, the uses of the AP English Language exam should be rethought so that it is confined to the liminal space of high school; college and university writing teachers and the institutions themselves should reconsider how they accept and apply credit for AP Lang. Postsecondary education in reading and writing and all other subject areas must be the space where academic critical literacy is taught and mastered by every student.

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APPENDIX A

AP Lang Goals (College Board, *English Description* 11-12)

The goals of an AP English Language and Composition course are diverse because the rhetoric and composition course in college serves a variety of functions in the undergraduate curriculum. The following, however, are the primary goals of the course:

▸

Developing critical literacy:

In most colleges and universities, the course is intended to strengthen the basic academic skills students need to perform confidently and effectively in courses across the curriculum. The course introduces students to the literacy expectations of higher education by cultivating essential academic skills such as critical inquiry, deliberation, argument, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Few colleges and universities regard completion of this entry-level course as the endpoint of students' English language education; subsequent courses in general and specialized curricula should continue building and refining the skills students practice in their rhetoric and composition courses.

▸

Facilitating informed citizenship:

While most college rhetoric and composition courses perform the academic service of preparing students to meet the literacy challenges of college-level study, they also serve the larger goal of cultivating the critical literacy skills students need for lifelong learning. Beyond their academic lives, students should be able to use the literacy skills practiced in the course for personal satisfaction and responsible engagement in civic life.

To support these goals, rhetoric and composition courses emphasize the reading and writing of analytic and argumentative texts instead of, or in combination with, texts representing English-language literary traditions. Like the college rhetoric and composition course, the AP English Language and Composition course focuses students' attention on the functions of written language in and out of the academy, asking students to practice the reading as well as the writing of texts designed to inquire, to explain, to criticize, and to persuade in a variety of rhetorical situations.
In this approach to the study and practice of written language, a writer's style is important because of its rhetorical, rather than its aesthetic, function.

APPENDIX B: TEACHER A'S AP LANG SYLLABUS (EXCERPT)

English 11 AP

AP Language & Composition

Nature of Course

There are two major components to this course: the survey of American Literature from the Puritan Age to the present and the preparation of students to take the AP Language and Composition Exam. The literary portion of the course stresses the influence of the role of historical events on literary schools of thought. Students investigate the major periods of Puritanism, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, and the related Twentieth Century movements.

Because students will take the AP Language and Composition Exam in May, the fiction and non-fiction reading assignments in this course will help students become better critical readers as well as help students broaden their own array of rhetorical strategies and stylistic choices for use in their writing of formal and informal essays. As we progress through American literature required fiction and non-fiction reading assignments, students will strengthen their skills in rhetorical analysis, a skill required for the AP exam. Students will also learn to write in the various modes of discourse (narration, description, comparison and contrast, process, cause and effect, exemplification, argumentation, etc.) and for a variety of purposes and audiences. Students will be expected to write an extended documented argumentative essay as well as write several documented synthesis essays in preparation for the AP Exam.

Students will also be expected to read outside of class on a topic of their choice throughout the spring semester. One or two of these outside sources must be visual in nature (cartoon, graph, artwork, etc.). On a bimonthly basis, students will make an oral presentation of the articles they have read and discuss how the article either supports or refutes their position on their topic. They are also required to note how the authors have developed their arguments in each of the articles the students present.

Goals of the Course

In addition to enhancing critical reading skills, the goal of this course is to prepare students for college-level writing across the curriculum and to prepare students for life-long writing experiences, both personal and professional. (C1) Students are to learn to assess, to analyze, and to write about poetry, short stories, novels, essays, autobiographies, biographies, and plays of selected major and minor American writers and to examine the intellectual and historical environments in which the works appear. Students will be expected to annotate each reading assignment as they read. Throughout the course, student will learn to write effectively, read critically, and think analytically so that they can become effective communicators both orally and in writing.

Because there will be an emphasis on writing, students are expected to refine their essay-writing skills. Many essays will be written in class and graded as a first draft. The expectation is that students with the aid of the teacher's comments will then revise the essay into a finished version. The student may also opt to take his/her paper to the Writing Center for additional teacher or peer feedback. The teacher will also provide comments on the final version, which will be submitted with all drafts. (C 3 and C10) Each revision is due a week after the paper has been returned to the student. Each student is expected to keep a log of skills to work on as well as skills mastered in each essay. Essays along with the log are kept in a portfolio and later returned to the student. Additionally, students will be expected to continue their study of grammar and vocabulary, and to sharpen their multiple-choice and essay test-taking skills.

APPENDIX C: TEACHER A'S SYNTHESIS ASSIGNMENT

Language and Composition AP Summer Reading Assignment for *This Land is Their Land:*

After reading Ehrenreich's book, choose one of her essays and write a three-page argument about the topic. You can agree with her, disagree, or offer a nuanced position that accepts some of what she says and refutes the rest. Use the classical organizational scheme to develop your argument. If you don't know what this is or if you have any questions, please email me at XXX@YYY and I'll send you a graphic organizer to help you with your argument.

After you have written your argument, you will do some research. Specifically, you need to find three sources to incorporate into your paper, which will be due during the first week of school. Your sources should support your position. It is important that you turn copies of these sources in along with your paper. At this stage of the process, you will not integrate your sources into your argument. When I first see your paper, I should see just your argument with no sources used.

After formally studying the process of writing a synthesis essay in the first week of school, you will revise this draft and incorporate your sources into your essay. You will be required to follow MLA guidelines regarding citations, works cited, and page formatting. Your synthesis essay will be graded.

APPENDIX D: TEACHER B'S COURSE SYLLABUS (RESOURCES ETC. OMITTED)

AP® English Language and Composition

Syllabus

Course Overview

AP® English Language and Composition is a two-semester junior-level writing course which covers a variety of rhetorical modes and prepares students to take the AP® Language and Composition examination in the spring. Students who enroll in this course typically have successfully completed the requirements of the ninth and tenth grade Honors English courses. AP Language is a college-level course that focuses on the rhetorical strategies writers and speakers use to impart their messages. Students will develop their own reading, writing, and thinking skills as they analyze a wide variety of non-fiction literature and visual media such as film, photography, political cartoons, and compose their own essays in a variety of styles and contexts (impromptu, multi-draft take home essays, extended multi-draft research papers) for a variety of audiences. The course prepares students to "write effectively and confidently in their college courses across the curriculum and in their personal and professional lives." The ability to write well, to write powerfully, and to command the English language confidently are worth more than mere test scores and letter grades; we believe that language shapes the world.

Course Planner – Semester One

We teach the course over two semesters, dividing each semester into two thematic quarters. Although students' schedules rotate, the teachers of this course plan together via e-mail and common planning times (bi-weekly professional team times and lunch). Students bring their AP English binders with them and as the teachers have all been sharing syllabi and curriculum materials, the switch is fairly seamless.

First Quarter (Reading and Writing to Discover One's Voice)

The first quarter emphasizes reading and writing in the descriptive and narrative rhetorical modes while developing skills of close reading and rhetorical analysis. Students then move to a study of the modes of pointing to instances and definition to better enable them to construct well-developed arguments. Students become familiar with the language of stylistic analysis as they learn how the tone and syntax of a selection can significantly affect its meaning.

The course opens with an immediate follow-up to the summer reading: George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*; students complete a timed, in-class writing (cite prompt) that serves to introduce them to the demands of the course and synthesize elements of the summer reading. Additionally, each student spends the summer reading a columnist of

his or her choice and completing informal response journals aimed at defining that columnist's style. The impromptu and subsequent classroom discussions of the students' summer columnists establish a context for the course which is explicitly addressed in the College Board's "Course Description," which the students receive, read, and discuss.

Close Reading

The first month of the course stresses the development of close reading and annotation skills. After learning the meaning and significance of an author's tone of voice and the textual features that contribute to it (Diction, Imagery, Details, Language, Sentence Structure), students practice analyzing and annotation short selections with teacher guidance. Model annotations and discussion questions in the course text, *The Brief Bedford Reader*, help students learn how diction, imagery, and syntax significantly affect the tone of a piece.

APPENDIX E: TEACHER B'S RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

Synthesis Research Paper Steps:

- Identify an issue
- Introduce the issue, providing background and context and defining any key terms.
- Ask a question on which reasonable people could disagree.
- Model this one-page overview of your topic after the AP Language Exam synthesis prompt; include a title with "Reading Time" and "Suggested Writing Time," directions, an introduction that provides a paragraph or two of background information, an assignment in which you pose your research question, and a list of sources.
- Make sure to develop an engaging question that invites a variety of responses.
- I will grade this model synthesis prompt on the clarity and specificity of the writing as well as the quality of the sources (which should represent varying styles (political cartoons, graphs, charts, pictures, essays, letters, articles, letters to the editor, etc.) from a variety of genres (magazine, newspaper, encyclopedia, online database articles, published books, historical documents, television/media, literature, etc), and reflect a variety of perspectives.

Next…

In your study groups, engage in lively discussion about the issues raised in the prompts. Take notes on these discussions and plan your draft. Make any changes necessary to the sources or prompt as you prepare to create a first draft of your paper

in class on April 20. Feel free to gather more sources in anticipation of expanding your impromptu draft into a 6 - 8 page research paper following MLA formatting.

Keep in Mind…

- While we will provide media center time, you will need to complete the bulk of the research on your own.
- The goal here is to apply your developing argumentative skills:
    - the ability to frame an issue
    - the ability to balance logical and emotional appeals
    - the ability to muster compelling evidence
    - the ability to converse with source material while developing your own position (as Joliffe advises, "read, analyze, generalize, converse, finesse, and argue")
    - the ability to expand a 2 - 3 page impromptu into a 6 - 8 page extended argumentative piece, simultaneously pursuing economy of language and depth of analysis.