Advanced Placement Study Skills

You've been studying for years. Is there some new and exotic set of skills needed to do well in AP courses and exams? No and yes. No, because the general skills of reading and writing are also fundamental for advanced work. But yes, because AP courses are at a college level. Some of the knowledge and skills you will need for an AP course will be more complex and at a higher level of difficulty than those commonly required in your regular classes.

Part 1: Reading

Because AP English courses demand serious reading, you might be tempted to "speed read"; that is, to scan paragraphs and pages as fast as you can while hunting for main ideas. In fact, some reading teachers used to recommend this practice. In an AP English course, however, it's a bad idea for at least two reasons. First, main ideas aren't usually quickly accessible from rapid scans of complex material. Many students who try to speed through well-written and complex texts register a few nouns or verbs and inaccurately infer from them the meaning of a sentence or paragraph. For large chunks of text -- pages and chapters -- speed becomes especially ill-advised.

A second objection to racing through good writing is that you are likely to miss the subtlety and complexity, the nuances and artistry of the writer. A paragraph of text by Thomas Carlyle or Joyce Carol Oates, a poem by Auden or Dickinson, or a drama by Shakespeare, can't be appreciated or even minimally comprehended without careful, often repeated readings. So, a general recommendation for reading your AP assignments is: read slowly, reread complex and important sentences, and ask yourself often "What does this sentence, paragraph, speech, stanza, or chapter mean?"

So far you've seen that in an AP English course you will have lots of reading, and that you should learn to read carefully. That's not an attractive combination for most students who have other courses, plus nonacademic activities. But here are a few practices that may make your AP reading more efficient as well as enjoyable and productive.

➢ Get a head start by obtaining copies of as many of the assigned texts as you can. Then you won't waste time searching for a text when you absolutely need it.
➤ Preview important reading assignments. Previewing means carefully noting the exact title and author’s name, the table of contents if there is one, the preface or introduction (which, will often state the author’s purpose and themes) and, in certain types of prose such as essays, the final paragraph(s).

➤ As you read, pause and articulate the principal ideas the author is expressing and the material the author uses to support them. These ideas may be fairly easy to identify in writings of critical essayist or journalists, but much more subtle in the poetry of Emily Dickinson or in a Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf novel.

➤ Knowing the context of a piece of writing can help you read with greater understanding and better recollection. As you read a work by Charles Dickens, James Baldwin, or Hanna Arendt, a knowledge of the period in which the authors lived and wrote contributes much to an understanding of what they tried to say, and to an appreciation of how well they accomplished their purpose.

➤ In reading poetry or important passages that are assigned by your teacher, slow down when you are having trouble and read the text aloud. Contrary to earlier advice, reading experts today say that comprehension of difficult materials is substantially improved by pronouncing the words. Reading aloud can, for example, help you more easily determine tone.

➤ Another anti-speed device that enhances comprehension of difficult material is rereading. Complex ideas and elegant expression are not always easily caught on a first reading, so go back and read them again.

➤ Form the habit of consulting the dictionary, the thesaurus, the encyclopedia, the atlas, and the globe. These resources are tools to aid you in discovering new ideas and knowledge.

Preparing for either of the two AP Examinations in English is a cooperative venture between students and teachers. Students are advised to read widely and reflect on their reading through extensive discussion, writing, and rewriting. Although you may do so independently - to supplement the work of a
conventional course - the best preparation for either AP Exam in English is an Advanced Placement course in that subject. In any case, you should assume considerable responsibility for the amount of reading and writing you do.

To understand and appreciate much of English and American literature, AP English students should have some acquaintance with the major themes of the Judaic and Christian religious traditions and with Greek and Roman mythology. These religious concepts and stories have influenced and informed first English and then American literary traditions since the Middle Ages, and they continue to provide material for modern writers in their attempts to give literary form to human experience. Students of Literature and Composition should also study intensively several representative works from various genres and periods from the Renaissance forward. You are advised to concentrate on works of recognized literary merit, worthy of scrutiny because of their richness of thought and language.

Part 2: Writing
Central to both of the AP English courses and examinations is writing. Both courses have but two goals: to provide you opportunities to become skilled, mature, critical readers and to become practiced, logical, clear, and honest writers.

The committee of English teachers that develops the examinations also prepares and writes the AP Course Description in English. In addition, it endorses the Teacher's Guide to AP Courses in English Language and Composition and the Teacher's Guide to AP courses in English Literature and Composition, which contain sample course syllabuses. As English teachers, the members of the committee support the teaching of writing as "process" – that is thinking, planning, drafting the text, reviewing, discussing, redrafting, editing, polishing, and finishing.

But the committee goes further; it states that writing "on call" or "on demand" is an important and a necessary skill for AP students to learn. Learning to write critical or expository essays on call takes time and practice. Many teachers approach writing lessons by having their students follow models. Textbooks of essays are commonly used as guides in many AP courses and this practice is fine so long as it does not lead to the production of mechanical and lifeless essays.

The most important thing to remember in writing a critical essay is to make use of the text given to you to analyze. Quote judiciously from it to support your observations. Be logical in your exposition of ideas; use evidence from the text to strengthen your analysis. If you acquire these skills of organizing ideas, marshalling
evidence, being logical in analysis, and using the text judiciously, you should have little trouble writing your essays on the examination.

Still in the regular AP English course there is always room to practice other kinds of writing; narrative, argument, exposition, personal writing all have their place alongside practice in writing on demand. Following are some points to think about as you study and practice writing.

- Your own writing skills and habits are directly influenced by your reading. It is probably true that if you sat down and read the complete three-volume edition of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and then wrote a paper about it, you would find that your writing style would reflect Gibbon’s great classical style with long periodic and balanced sentences, great series of elegant phrases and clauses, and an elevated, lofty tone. Therefore, read omnivorously and you won’t even have to be taught how to write. It will come naturally.

- Writing at its best is great fun. After you have penned what you think is a great sentence or composed a clean, logical paragraph, or finished an essay or paper that you are proud of, read it over to yourself out loud. Enjoy it. Let the phrases and clauses roll around in your mind; savor the diction, delight in the ideas. Practice reading it with different accents and tonal emphases. Claim it as part of your self. You will discover you have a voice worthy of respect.

- E. M. Forster is reputed to have said that he never knew clearly what it was he thought until he spoke it; and once he had spoken something he never knew clearly what it was that he said until he had written it down. Then, he said, he could play with it and give it the final form that he wanted. Be like Forster: think, speak, write, analyze your writing, give it final shape.

- Think of grammar, mechanics, and rhetoric as tools, aids, props. Think of them as elements that you can order to clean up your ideas, to sharpen your statements, to make your words and sentences glisten and stick. Think of them as systems complete in themselves through which you can submit your ideas and sentences to make sure they say what you want them to say. Don’t be embarrassed about making errors; making errors is a good way and a sure way to learn about them and then to eliminate them from your
writing.

- Every subject of study, every profession or job has its own technical vocabulary - words used by people engaged in an occupation or trade. Writers and critical readers also have a technical vocabulary they use when talking about language, drama, poetry, fiction, etc. You should compile a list of such words and learn to use them with confidence. In class, if you routinely read each others' essays or written work, notice which essays use the right vocabulary when talking about writing and how that use strengthens them. Some words you should already know are: syntax, tone, rhetoric, attitude, antecedent, denouement, exposition, climax, atmosphere, voice, speaker, stock character, thesis, ideology, persuasion, paradox, allusion, ambivalence, syllogism, and aphorism.

- A word about audience. In school, you are often writing for an audience of one - the teacher. In many cases, however, your teachers will specify an audience that you are supposed to keep in mind when writing a paper. Remember that most of us in daily life are not writing for a particular person or audience, but rather for someone called the "general reader." The general reader is someone, anyone, who possesses an average intelligence and has a fairly sound general education. This general reader is interested in the events of the day and in the world as a whole. He or she has a good measure of sympathy for humankind, appreciates the happy as well as the unhappy accidents of life. This reader also is blessed with a good sense of humor and the ability to listen to others, to writers like you in fact. Keep the general reader in mind when you write.