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AP English Language and Composition Exam

A. Question 3 -- YEAR?

The first chapter of Ecclesiastes, a book in the Bible, concludes with these words:

"For in much wisdom is much grief, and in increase of knowledge is increase of sorrow."

Write a carefully reasoned, persuasive essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies this assertion. Use evidence from your observation, experience, or reading to develop your position.

B. Question? – 1990

Recently the issue of how much freedom we should (or must) allow student newspapers was argued all the way to the Supreme Court. Read the following items carefully and then write an essay presenting a logical argument for or against the Supreme Court decision.

1. The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of American states that "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."
2. In 1983 the principal of Hazelwood East High School objected to two articles in the proofs of the student newspaper (one story described three unnamed Hazelwood students' experiences with pregnancy; the other discussed the impact of divorce on students). The principal instructed the faculty advisor to delete the two pages on which these articles appeared. The students sued the school district on the grounds that their First Amendment rights had been violated.
3. The district court concluded that school officials may impose restraints on students' speech in activities that are "an integral part of the school's educational function."
4. The court of appeals reversed the district court's decision, arguing that the school newspaper was not only "part of the school-adopted curriculum" but also a public forum, "intended to be operated as a conduit for student viewpoint." Accordingly, the court held that school officials had violated the students' First Amendment rights.
5. The Supreme Court, in 1988, overruled the court of appeals, arguing in its majority opinion that a school need not tolerate student speech that is inconsistent with its "basic educational mission," and that Journalism II (the class that produces the newspaper) is a "laboratory situation" in which students apply the skills they have learned in journalism.

The Court concluded that educators do not offend the First Amendment by exercising editorial control in school-sponsored activities so long as these actions are related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.

6. In the dissenting opinion, three of the justices argued that the principal had violated the First Amendment, as the deleted articles neither disrupted classwork nor invaded the rights of others. In addition, they pointed out that such censorship in no way further the curriculum purposed of a student newspaper, unless one believes that the purpose of the school newspaper is to teach students that the press ought never to report bad news or express unpopular views.

C. Question 2 – 1992

In *The Spectator* for December 15, 1711, Joseph Addison wrote:

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 human life.

Write a carefully reasoned persuasive essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Addison's assertion. Use evidence from your observation, experience, or reading to develop your position.

D. Question 2 – 1993

Read the following selection by H. L. Mencken. Then write a carefully reasoned essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Mencken's views on the artist's relation to society. Be sure to support your argument with references to particular writers, composers, or other artists.

It is almost as safe to assume that an artist of any dignity is against his country, i.e., against the environment in which God hath placed him, as it is to assume that his country is against the artist. The special quality which makes an artist of him might almost be defined, indeed, as an extraordinary capacity for irritation, a pathological sensitiveness to environmental pricks and stings. He differs from the rest of us mainly because he reacts sharply and in an uncommon manner to phenomena which leave the rest of us unmoved, or, at most, merely annoy us vaguely. He is, in brief, a more delicate fellow than we are, and much less fitted to prosper and enjoy himself under the conditions of life which he and we must face alike. Therefore, he takes to artistic endeavor, which is at once a criticism of life and an attempt to escape from life.

So much for the theory of it. The more the facts are studied, the more they bear it out. In those fields of art, at all events, which concern themselves with ideas as well as with sensations it is almost impossible to find any trace of an artist who was not actively hostile to his environment, and thus an indifferent patriot.

E. Question 2 -- 1994

In *The March of Folly*, historian Barbara Tuchman writes:

Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists of assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notion while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts.

Some people would claim that what Tuchman calls wooden-headedness plays a remarkably large role in all organizations and, indeed, in all human affairs.

Write a carefully reasoned persuasive essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies this idea about the prevalence of wooden-headedness in human actions and decisions. Use evidence from your reading and/or observation to develop your position.

F. Question 3 -- 1995

The paragraph below comes from a 1979 essay by expatriate African American writer James Baldwin. Read the paragraph carefully and then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Baldwin's ideas about the importance of language as a "key to identity" and to social acceptance. Use specific evidence from your observation, experience, or reading to develop your position.

It goes with saying, then, that language is also 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 have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island makes England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to "put your business in the street": You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future.

G. Question 3 – 1999

In the following excerpt from *Antigone*, by the classic Greek playwright Sophocles, the wise Teiresias observes

Think: all men make mistakes,
But a good man yields when he
Knows his course is wrong,
And repairs the evil: The only
Crime is pride.

Take some time to think about the implications of the quotation. Then write a carefully reasoned essay that explores the validity of the assertion, using examples from your reading, observation, or experience to develop your position.

H. Question 3 – 2000

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

The lines above are from a speech by King Lear. Write a carefully reasoned essay in which you briefly paraphrase Lear's statement and then defend, challenge, or qualify his view of the relationship between wealth and justice. Support your argument with specific references to your reading, observation, or experience.

I. Question 1 – 2003

In his 1998 book *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, Neal Gabler wrote the following.

One does not necessarily have to cluck in disapproval to admit that entertainment is all the things its detractors say it is: fun, effortless, sensational, mindless, formulaic, predictable and subversive. In fact, one might argue that those are the very reasons so many people love it.

At the same time it is not hard to see why cultural aristocrats in the nineteenth century and intellectuals in the twentieth hated entertainment and why they predicted, as one typical nineteenth century critic railed, that its eventual effect would be "to overturn all morality, to poison the springs of domestic happiness, to dissolve the ties of our social order, and to involve our country in ruin."

Write a thoughtful and carefully constructed essay in which you use specific evidence to defend, challenge, or qualify the assertion that entertainment has the capacity to "ruin" society.

J. Question 2 – 2004

Contemporary life is marked by controversy. Choose a controversial local, national, or global issue with which you are familiar. Then, using appropriate evidence, write an essay that carefully considers the opposing positions on this controversy and proposes a solution or compromise.

K. Question 1 – 2005

The passage below is from "Training for Statesmanship" (1953), an article written by George F. Kennan, one of the principal architects of United States foreign policy during the period following the end of the Second World War. Read the passage carefully and select what you believe is Kennan's most compelling observation. Then write an essay in which you consider the extent to which that observation holds true for the United States or for any other country. Support your argument with appropriate evidence.

In our country, the element of power is peculiarly diffused. It is not concentrated, as it is in other countries, in what we might call the “pure form” of a national uniformed police establishment functioning as the vehicle of a central political will. Power with us does exist to some extent in courts of law and in police establishments, but it also exists in many other American institutions. It exists in our economic system, though not nearly to the degree the Marxists claim. Sometimes, unfortunately, it exists in irregular forces—in underworld groups, criminal gangs, or informal associations of a vigilante nature—capable of terrorizing their fellow citizens in one degree or another. Above all it exists in the delicate compulsions of our social life, the force of community opinion within our country—in the respect we have for the good opinion of our neighbors. For reasons highly complex, we Americans place upon ourselves quite extraordinary obligations of conformity to the group in utterance and behavior, and this feature of our national life seems to be growing rather than declining. All these things can bring us to put restraints upon ourselves which in other parts of the world would be imposed upon people only by the straightforward exercise of the central police authority.

L. Question 3 – 2005

In “The Singer Solution to World Poverty,” an article that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics, calls attention to the urgent need for food and medicine in many parts of the world. Singer argues that prosperous people should donate to overseas aid organization such a UNICEF or Oxfam America all money not needed for the basic requirements of life. The formula is simple: whatever money you’re spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away.”

Write an essay in which you evaluate the pros and cons of Singer’s argument. Use appropriate evidence as you examine each side, and indicate which position you find more persuasive.

M. Question 3 -- 2006

From talk radio to television shows, from popular magazines to Web blogs, ordinary citizens, political figures, and entertainers express their opinions on a wide range of topics. Are these opinions worthwhile? Does the expression of such opinions foster democratic values?

Write an essay in which you take a position on the value of such public statements of opinion, supporting your view with appropriate evidence.

N. Question 3 -- 2007

A weekly feature of *The New York Times Magazine* is a column by Randy Cohen called “The Ethicist,” in which people raise ethical questions to which Cohen provides answers. The question below is from the column that appeared on April 4, 2003.

At my high school, various clubs and organizations sponsor charity drives, asking students to bring in money, food, and clothing. Some teachers offer bonus points on tests and final averages as incentives to participate. Some parents believe that this send a morally wrong message, undermining the value of charity as a selfless act. Is the exchange of donations for grades O.K.?

The practice of offering incentives for charitable acts is widespread, from school projects to fund drives by organizations such as public television stations, to federal income tax deductions for contributions to charities. In a well-written essay develop a position on the ethics of offering incentives for charitable acts. Support your position with evidence from your reading, observations, and/or experience.

O. Question 3 -- 2008

For years corporations have sponsored high school sports. Their ads are found on the outfield fence at baseball parks or on the walls of the gymnasium, the football stadium, or even the locker room. Corporate logos are even found on players’ uniforms. But some schools have moved beyond corporate sponsorship of sports to allowing “corporate partners” to place their names and ads on all kinds of school facilities—libraries, music rooms, cafeterias.

Some schools accept money to require students to watch Channel One, a news program that included advertising. And schools often negotiate exclusive contracts with soft drink or clothing companies.

Some people argue that corporate partnerships are a necessity for cash-strapped schools. Others argue that schools should provide an environment free from ads and corporate influence. Using appropriate evidence, write an essay in which you evaluate the pros and cons of corporate sponsorship for schools and indicate why you find one position more persuasive than the other.

P. Question 3 – 2008, Form B

Read the following excerpt from *The Decline of Radicalism* (1969) by Daniel J. Boorstin and consider the implications of the distinction Boorstin makes between dissent and disagreement. Then, using appropriate evidence, write a carefully reasoned essay in which you defend, challenge, or qualify Boorstin's distinction.

Dissent is the great problem of American today. It overshadows all others. It is a symptom, an expression, a consequence, and a cause of all others.

I say dissent and not disagreement. And it is the distinction between dissent and disagreement which I really want to make. Disagreement produces debate but dissent produces dissension. Dissent (which comes from the Latin, *dis* and *sentire*) means originally to feel apart from others.

People who disagree have an argument, but people who dissent have a quarrel. People may disagree and both may count themselves in the majority. But a person who dissents is by definition in a minority. A liberal society thrives on disagreement but is killed by dissension. Disagreement is the life blood of democracy, dissension is its cancer.

Q. Question 3 – 2009

“Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant.”
--Horace

Consider this quotation about adversity from the Roman poet Horace. Then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Horace's assertion about the role that adversity (financial or political hardship, danger, misfortune, etc.) plays in developing a person's character. Support your argument with appropriate evidence from your reading, observation, or experience.

R. Question 3 – 2010

In his 2004 book, *Status Anxiety*, Alain de Botton argues that the chief aim of humorists is not merely to entertain but “to convey with impunity message that might be dangerous or impossible to state directly.” Because society allows humorists to say things that other people cannot or will not say, de Botton sees humorists as serving a vital function in society.

Think about the implications of de Botton's view of the role of humorists (cartoonists, stand-up comics, satirical writers, hosts of television programs, etc.). Then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies de Botton's claim about the vital role of humorists. Use specific, appropriate evidence to develop your position.

S. Question 3 – 2011

The following passage is from *Rights of Man*, a book written by pamphleteer Thomas Paine in 1791. Born in England, Paine was an intellectual, a revolutionary, and a supporter of American independence from England. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay that examines the extent to which Paine's characterization of America holds true today. Use appropriate evidence to support your argument.

If there is a country in the world, where concord, according to common calculation, would be least expected, it is American. Made up, as it is, of people from different nations, accustomed to different forms and habits of government, speaking different languages, and more different in their modes of worship, it would appear that the union of such a people was impracticable; but by the simple operation of constructing

government on the principles of society and the rights of man, every difficulty retires, and all the parts are brought into cordial unison. There, the poor are not oppressed, the rich are not privileged.... Their taxes are few, because their government is just; and as there is nothing to render them wretched, there is nothing to engender riots and tumults.

T. Question 3 – 2011, Form B

American essayist and social critic H. L. Mencken (1880—1956) wrote, “The average man does not want to be free. He simply wants to be safe.” In a well-written essay, examine the extent to which Mencken’s observation applies to contemporary society, supporting your position with appropriate evidence.