

**Question 3**

**Suggested time—40 minutes.**

(This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

Many people spend long hours trying to achieve perfection in their personal or professional lives. Similarly, people often demand perfection from others, creating expectations that may be challenging to live up to. In contrast, some people think perfection is not attainable or desirable.

Write an essay that argues your position on the value of striving for perfection.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible position.
- Provide evidence to support your line of reasoning.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

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**Begin your response to this question at the top of a new page in the separate Free Response booklet and fill in the appropriate circle at the top of each page to indicate the question number.**

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# AP<sup>®</sup> English Language and Composition

## Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentary

### **Inside:**

#### **Free Response Question 3**

- ☒ **Scoring Guideline**
- ☒ **Student Samples**
- ☒ **Scoring Commentary**

## Argument Essay

**6 points**

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Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
<b>Row A</b> <b>Thesis</b> <b>(0-1 points)</b>	<b>0 points</b> For any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is no defensible thesis.</li> <li>The intended thesis only restates the prompt.</li> <li>The intended thesis provides a summary of the issue with no apparent or coherent claim.</li> <li>There is a thesis, but it does not respond to the prompt.</li> </ul>	<b>1 point</b> Responds to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible position.
	<b>Decision Rules and Scoring Notes</b>	
	<b>Responses that do not earn this point:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only restate the prompt.</li> <li>Do not take a position, or the position is vague or must be inferred.</li> <li>State an obvious fact rather than making a claim that requires a defense.</li> </ul>	<b>Responses that earn this point:</b> Respond to the prompt by taking a position on the value of striving for perfection, rather than restating or rephrasing the prompt. Clearly take a position rather than just stating that there are pros/cons.
	<b>Examples that do not earn this point:</b> <b>Do not take a position</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“In this world, there are those who won’t be satisfied unless everything is perfect, and those who are perfectly happy to let things be as they are.”</i></li> </ul> <b>Address the topic of the prompt but are not defensible—it is an obvious fact stated as a claim</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“Perfection is something that many people strive for, but very few actually achieve.”</i></li> </ul>	<b>Examples that earn this point:</b> <b>Present a defensible position that responds to the prompt.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“Perfection is something that is almost impossible to reach, so it’s not worth the effort to try to achieve it.”</i></li> <li><i>“While the outcome may not always be successful, the struggle to achieve perfection can yield many benefits along the way.”</i></li> <li><i>“Although it may be fine to set high standards and expect perfection from yourself, it’s unrealistic to believe that other people will be willing to put in what it takes to reach the same levels of perfection.”</i></li> </ul>
<b>Additional Notes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The thesis may be more than one sentence, provided the sentences are in close proximity.</li> <li>The thesis may be anywhere within the response.</li> <li>The thesis <i>may</i> establish a line of reasoning that structures the essay, but it needn’t do so to earn the thesis point.</li> <li>A thesis that meets the criteria can be awarded the point whether or not the rest of the response successfully supports that line of reasoning.</li> </ul>		

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria				
<b>Row B</b> <b>Evidence</b> <b>AND</b> <b>Commentary</b> <b>(0-4 points)</b>	<b>0 points</b> Simply restates thesis (if present), repeats provided information, or offers information irrelevant to the prompt.	<b>1 point</b> <b>EVIDENCE:</b> Provides evidence that is mostly general.  <b>AND</b>  <b>COMMENTARY:</b> Summarizes the evidence but does not explain how the evidence supports the argument.	<b>2 points</b> <b>EVIDENCE:</b> Provides some specific, relevant evidence.  <b>AND</b>  <b>COMMENTARY:</b> Explains how some of the evidence relates to the student's argument, but no line of reasoning is established, or the line of reasoning is faulty.	<b>3 points</b> <b>EVIDENCE:</b> Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning.  <b>AND</b>  <b>COMMENTARY:</b> Explains how some of the evidence supports a line of reasoning.	<b>4 points</b> <b>EVIDENCE:</b> Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning.  <b>AND</b>  <b>COMMENTARY:</b> Consistently explains how the evidence supports a line of reasoning.
	<b>Decision Rules and Scoring Notes</b>				
	<b>Typical responses that earn 0 points:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are incoherent or do not address the prompt.</li> <li>May be just opinion with no evidence or evidence that is irrelevant.</li> </ul>	<b>Typical responses that earn 1 point:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tend to focus on summary of evidence rather than specific details.</li> </ul>	<b>Typical responses that earn 2 points:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consist of a mix of specific evidence and broad generalities.</li> <li>May contain some simplistic, inaccurate, or repetitive explanations that don't strengthen the argument.</li> <li>May make one point well but either do not make multiple supporting claims or do not adequately support more than one claim.</li> <li>Do not explain the connections or progression between the student's claims, so a line of reasoning is not clearly established.</li> </ul>	<b>Typical responses that earn 3 points:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uniformly offer evidence to support claims.</li> <li>Focus on the importance of specific details to build an argument.</li> <li>Organize an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims.</li> <li>Commentary may fail to integrate some evidence or fail to support a key claim.</li> </ul>	<b>Typical responses that earn 4 points:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uniformly offer evidence to support claims.</li> <li>Focus on the importance of specific details to build an argument.</li> <li>Organize and support an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims, each with adequate evidence that is clearly explained.</li> </ul>
	<b>Additional Notes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing that suffers from grammatical and/or mechanical errors that interfere with communication cannot earn the fourth point in this row.</li> </ul>				

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
Row C Sophistication (0-1 points)	<b>0 points</b> Does not meet the criteria for one point.	<b>1 point</b> Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes	
	<b>Responses that do not earn this point:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attempt to contextualize their argument, but such attempts consist predominantly of sweeping generalizations (<i>"In a world where..."</i> OR <i>"Since the beginning of time..."</i>).</li> <li>Only hint at or suggest other arguments (<i>"While some may argue that..."</i> OR <i>"Some people say..."</i>).</li> <li>Use complicated or complex sentences or language that is ineffective because it does not enhance the argument.</li> </ul>	<b>Responses that earn this point may demonstrate sophistication of thought and/or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation by doing any of the following:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crafting a nuanced argument by consistently identifying and exploring complexities or tensions.</li> <li>Articulating the implications or limitations of an argument (either the student's argument or an argument related to the prompt) by situating it within a broader context.</li> <li>Making effective rhetorical choices that consistently strengthen the force and impact of the student's argument.</li> <li>Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.</li> </ol>
	<b>Additional Notes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This point should be awarded only if the sophistication of thought or complex understanding is part of the student's argument, not merely a phrase or reference.</li> </ul>	

### Sample 3A

Children are taught from a young age that perfection is something to be desired, often hearing the phrase "Practice Makes Perfect". Throughout school, students are encouraged to achieve perfection by obtaining good grades. While there are debates to being taught perfection from a young age, it is something to strive for, especially in one's professional life, although there should be more room for mistakes in one's personal life.

Many professions, ranging from fashion designers to doctors, rely upon the need to be perfect. Without the value placed upon striving for perfection, doctors would have no need to go through years of schooling and residency to ensure they are prepared to perform brain or open-heart surgery and other critical procedures. Similarly, other professions such as fashion designers would not fulfill their clients' wishes and would be unable to withhold communication, which could lead to business deterioration. Not striving for perfection can have dangerous consequences as well. Restaurants need to be especially careful; one wrong or lazy decision and someone could end up in the hospital. McDonald's discovered the value in striving for perfection the hard way several years ago when a woman went to McDonald's for her morning cup of coffee. The coffee pots had been turned on much too high, well above what was safe to be consumed by humans, but no one checked as it was a busy morning at McDonald's. The woman ordered her coffee and upon consumption received third-degree burns instead of her morning pick-me-up. She sued McDonald's over the incident and won, as she ended up in the hospital as a result of the coffee and subsequent burns. Had McDonald's placed more of a focus on perfection within their workplace, the effects of this incident would have been reduced. Within professions, it is often very important that one pays attention to details to ensure their job is done correctly and safely.

The striving for perfection not only helps to save lives and avoid potential million-dollar lawsuits but can also lead to the creation of something new to be used and enjoyed worldwide. For example, while creating the light bulb, Thomas Edison had to create hundreds of light bulb prototypes using a variety of materials and methods before finding one that worked. He did not settle for his prototypes; while they provided helpful information on electricity, its conduction, and AC vs. DC electricity, he wanted perfection. Through determination and his desire to create the perfect lightbulb, Edison was able to achieve something most of his colleagues believed to be impossible after his great number of failures. In more recent times, SpaceX exhibited a similar desire to achieve perfection when it came to their rocket boosters. In the past, these boosters, which at launch were filled with fuel, were rarely ever recovered and instead were destroyed. SpaceX set out to change this as a way of conserving resources and spending less money long-term. Their plan didn't seem to be working out at first as booster after booster came back, missing the landing zone, exploding, or landing and falling into the ocean. SpaceX continued to alter their design, hoping to find the one that would finally solve the problem. Most other companies, especially privately funded ones, would not have continued pouring money into something that was proving to be fruitless. However, after dozens of failed attempts, SpaceX was finally able to achieve perfection and successfully land booster after booster. Without the drive for perfection, neither Edison, SpaceX, and thousands of other inventors and scientists would have been able to achieve what was once thought to be impossible.

Although perfection has been proven useful in many professional settings, its practicality in one's personal life is much lower. Recent studies have shown that the average high school student has the same level of stress as a 1960 psychiatric or insane asylum patient. As time has passed, the expectations placed on students have grown. Before, fewer students would move on to college as there were more opportunities to live a successful life without a college degree. As life has become more mainstreamed, students are encouraged more and more often to get a college degree if they hope to be successful in life. This increases the competition for spots in top colleges, forcing students to try and take the most

challenging classes, participate in as many sports and extracurricular activities as possible, and volunteer, all while trying to balance relationships between friends and family members. Students work towards perfection, and when they fall short, they are criticized and told they aren't good enough or will never amount to anything. Recent studies have also found record high rates of depression and anxiety among teenagers, with the #1 leading cause of death being suicide. With very little room to make mistakes during school, while still learning, students can become obsessed with creating an unhealthy dedication to perfection, causing it to become counterproductive. While it is working in a professional environment where one is usually older, more mature, and able to handle criticism and understand the implications of their actions, high schoolers are still learning about the world. Requiring perfection of them is unfair and leads to traumatic data as referenced above. Students of all ages should have a safe space at school

to make mistakes so once they enter the professional world, they won't be afraid to continue working towards perfection, even if it means years of schooling or spending thousands of dollars on a project that, with enough dedication, will become perfect. Perfection is not always bad and often, especially in the fields of science, can lead to new discoveries and inventions. Without anyone to strive for perfection, the world would be stagnant because people would be content with what they have, never wondering if it's been perfected. Perfection should be gradually introduced, though, to avoid high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression amongst students. Those can all have negative impacts on their lives and as well as serious consequences, including suicide. Perfection moderation is necessary and beneficial to all, so long as those encouraging it understand the impact it would have on anyone involved.



### Sample 3B

Perfection is a treacherous and unattainable concept that many people strive for. The value of perfection is none because it simply doesn't exist. However, the act of striving for perfection holds much value. Although perfection is sought after time and time again, with no success, the growth shown is immaculately greater. Personally, I struggle with being a perfectionist. I think the better term to describe it is suffering from inevitable dissatisfaction. Growing up, I was told that "nobody's perfect" from Hannah Montana on television and semi-believed it. However, there was always that feeling of needing more when doing schoolwork or playing a sport. I did not believe a 98% in a class was good enough when we were constantly bombarded with resources to help us. One experience when I was playing soccer, I scored 2 goals for my team but was ultimately not satisfied because I couldn't reach a hat-trick (3 goals in a game). The idea of perfection developed my severe anxiety and depression. But to counter that, trying my hardest and reaching for the unachievable skyrocketed my work ethic, responsibility, gave me motivation, and thick skin. Now, with my unending perfectionism, I have achieved distinguished honor roll, became an officer of clubs at school, and landed great jobs at a young age. And yes, the failures hurt, but as Kelly Clarkson says best, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

In the workplace, perfection is sought after and sometimes claimed in arrogance. You may catch yourself saying, "I wish I could be like him/her, they're always perfect," or calling a sibling "little miss perfect." We throw that word around in our daily lives on many occasions. The word has both a positive and negative connotation. Negative when regarding comparison in a negative light, or positive when praising someone for their extravagant work.

The aspect of perfection is a pit of dissatisfaction and ultimate disappointment, but reaching for it leads to better outcomes than what you can imagine.

### Sample 3C

Achieving perfection is not possible; it creates expectations that no one can live up to.

Perfection seems so simple, even though it isn't possible to obtain. So many people desire to be perfect, to be the best in all they do. It is an impossible competition that no one can win. There will always be someone "better". I learned this recently, my whole life I wanted to be the perfect student, soccer player, and daughter. However, life does not work that way. People expect perfection, so I always thought I could achieve that, but it turns out that those expectations are unrealistic.

Expecting perfection will always create disappointment. No one can find the "perfect" person because they don't exist. The "perfect student", as I said previously, is unattainable. Even the student at the top of their class will fail or mess up eventually. Failing happens to the best of us. Trying to be perfect is useless; no one will achieve perfection before they die, they will just die trying. Expectations of being perfect are a lot of money, nice clothes, a big house, etc. But where does happiness come in? When is trying your best going to be good enough? Never is the only answer if all you do is aim for perfection. Perfection isn't possible.

No matter how hard they try, no one will ever meet the expectations that perfection requires; they will only die trying.

### Question 3

**Note:** Student samples are quoted verbatim and may contain spelling and grammatical errors.

#### Overview

The argument prompt for this year’s exam asked students to write an essay that argued their position on the value of striving for perfection. In their responses they were expected to respond to the prompt with a thesis that presented a defensible position, provide evidence to support their line of reasoning, explain how the evidence supported their line of reasoning, and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating their argument. The skills expected to be demonstrated in this writing included 2.A, 4.A, 4.B, 4.C, 6.A, 6.B, 6.C, 8.A, 8.B, and 8.C.

The prompt was highly accessible to the students. In the words of the Question Leader, this prompt allowed test takers to demonstrate “how much the topic was highly relevant to their current realities: pressures of the school system, expectations of family, competition in sports (at both professional and high school levels), messages found on social media, impact of the coronavirus, challenges of sibling rivalry” were among the examples test takers used. The Question Leader continues, “Students connected to the topic in surprising, powerful, and beautiful ways. That level of connection extended to even the lower-scoring essays. Even responses that struggled with the abstraction of ‘perfection,’ could still articulate a position.” Students were expected to offer specific evidence and, most importantly, demonstrate that they could develop a clear line of reasoning that was logically organized and cohesive in presentation with all pieces working together in service of their argument. Stronger essays used commentary to explain how the evidence supported the larger claim.

#### Sample: 3A

**Score: 1-4-1**

#### Thesis (0–1) points: 1

The thesis, which is stated at the end of paragraph 1, takes a nuanced position on the value of striving for perfection: “While there are drawbacks to being encouraged to be perfect from a young age, perfection is something to strive for especially in one’s professional life, although there should be more room for mistakes in one’s personal life.” This thesis presents a defensible position that is developed in the rest of the response, and its slight clumsiness is acceptable due to the draft nature of the response.

#### Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 4

The response uniformly offers specific and wide-ranging evidence to support all its claims. The details about McDonald’s, Edison, and SpaceX are full, and the link to “a 1950s or 1960s insane asylum patient” in paragraph 4 is particularly well integrated. The student consistently explains how the evidence provided supports a line of reasoning, making use of cause and effect to show the impact of not seeking perfection (e.g., “Had McDonald’s placed more of a focus on perfection within their workplace the effects of this incident would have been reduced. Within professions it is often very important that one pays attention to details to ensure their job is done correctly and safely” in paragraph 2). The response is well organized, with transitions effectively demonstrating how all the response’s pieces work together in a coherent line of reasoning (e.g., “Not striving for perfection can have dangerous consequences as well,” “Striving for perfection not only helps save lives and avoid potential million dollar lawsuits but can lead to the creation of something new,” and “In more recent times”).

#### Sophistication (0–1 points): 1

The response explores the complexities of the topic when, after establishing all the benefits to perfection, it pivots to a thorough discussion of how although “perfection has proven useful in many professional settings, its practicality in one’s personal life is much lower.” In exploring aspects of success and of safety in the

### Question 3 (continued)

business world as well as problems within the life of the individual, the student situates the argument within a broader context.

**Sample: 3B**

**Score: 1-3-0**

**Thesis (0–1 points): 1**

The response makes a defensible claim in the second and third sentences of paragraph 1. This multisentence thesis distinguishes between perfection itself and the act of striving for it: “The value of perfection is none because it simply doesn’t exist. However, the act of striving for perfection holds much value.”

**Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 3**

The response holds to its thesis as it defends its two claims in a line of reasoning that runs throughout the response. The student uniformly offers evidence to support the claims, providing specific details in paragraph 2 on their personal experience striving for perfection in school and sports (e.g., “I did not believe a 98% in a class was good enough” and “I scored 2 goals for my team but was ultimately not satisfied because I couldn’t reach a hat-trick”). The commentary does not integrate the sibling and workplace examples in paragraph 3 as well as it does the evidence in paragraph 2, but the exploration of the student’s personal experience is solid, and the structure of paragraph 2, bookended by quotes from two pop singers to demonstrate the shift in thinking tied to the thesis, demonstrates an organized approach to developing the argument.

**Sophistication (0–1): 0**

The use of the student’s personal experience is compelling, but the response overall does not demonstrate a consistently vivid and persuasive style. While the thesis, with its double claim, is perhaps more nuanced than usual, the response does not consistently explore any complexities or tensions tied to those claims; and while the response does briefly touch on the example of “the workplace,” it ultimately does not situate the argument within any broader context.

**Sample: 3C**

**Score: 1-1-0**

**Thesis (0–1 points): 1**

The thesis is a single, comma splice sentence that comprises all of paragraph 1. It does present a defensible claim: “Achieving perfection is not possible, it creates expectations that no one can live up to.”

**Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 1**

The evidence provided in the response is mostly general, with references to a “perfect person” and the “perfect student” but with very little explanation or commentary to link the evidence to the argument (e.g., “my whole life I wanted to be the perfect student, soccer player, and daughter. Life, however, does not work that way”). Much of the commentary is comprised of unsubstantiated claims or platitudes (e.g., “Failing happens to the best of us”) and does not succeed in supporting the little evidence provided.

**Sophistication (0–1 points): 0**

The response’s style is not vivid or persuasive (e.g., “Expectations of perfect are a lot of money, nice clothes, big house, etc.”). The response itself demonstrates a simplistic approach that does not explore complexities or tension; rather, it merely summarizes ideas about expectations and perfection.