

AP English Language Reference Sheet

Annotating and Commenting on Syntax as a Rhetorical Technique

Big idea

Syntax is the arrangement of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. In AP Lang, do not just label syntax. Explain how the sentence design shapes emphasis, pace, contrast, clarity, tension, or the audience's response.

A strong comment connects structure to purpose: This syntactic choice helps the writer ...

1. The Annotation Move: Notice -> Name -> Explain

Step	What to do	Student question
Notice	Mark what the sentence is doing.	Is it short, long, balanced, interrupted, repeated, question-like, or built on contrast?
Name	Use a precise term.	Simple sentence, complex sentence, compound-complex sentence, parallel structure, juxtaposition, rhetorical question.
Explain	Connect structure to effect and purpose.	How does the pattern influence tone, pace, emphasis, audience pressure, or the writer's argument?

Commentary sentence frames

The writer's use of [syntax term] emphasizes [idea] by [how the structure works].

By shifting from [structure] to [structure], the writer creates [effect], which helps [purpose].

The [short/long/balanced/interrupted] sentence mirrors the writer's [tone/urgency/certainty/complexity].

2. Simple vs. Complex Sentences

Simple sentence

A simple sentence has one independent clause. It can be brief and forceful, or it can contain many modifiers, but it expresses one main grammatical unit.

- Common rhetorical effects: clarity, finality, confidence, bluntness, emphasis, emotional punch.
- Annotation question: Why might the writer isolate this idea in one complete unit?

Complex sentence

A complex sentence has one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. It often shows cause, condition, concession, qualification, or relationship between ideas.

- Common rhetorical effects: nuance, layered reasoning, qualification, cause-and-effect, tension between ideas.
- Annotation question: What idea is grammatically dependent, and what idea is made central?

Type	Structure	Possible rhetorical effect
Simple	One independent clause	Creates a direct, memorable claim; can sound certain or blunt.
Complex	Independent clause + dependent clause	Shows relationships among ideas; can make an argument feel thoughtful or qualified.

3. Compound and Compound-Complex Sentences

Compound sentence

A compound sentence joins two or more independent clauses, often with a coordinating conjunction such as for, and, nor, but, or, yet, or so.

- Common rhetorical effects: balance, contrast, accumulation, cause-and-effect, equal weight between claims.
- Annotation question: Are the clauses working together, pushing against each other, or building momentum?

Compound-complex sentence

A compound-complex sentence includes two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause. It can hold several relationships at once.

- Common rhetorical effects: intellectual complexity, layered logic, tension, crowded urgency, a sense that several ideas must be considered together.
- Annotation question: How does the sentence structure reflect the complexity of the issue?

Type	Quick test	Commentary angle
Compound	Independent clause + independent clause	Can balance two ideas or create contrast between equal claims.
Compound-complex	2+ independent clauses + dependent clause	Can show layered reasoning, conflict, or a complicated relationship among ideas.

4. Parallel Structure

Parallel structure repeats a grammatical pattern: similar words, phrases, clauses, or sentence structures appear in a series or pair.

- Common rhetorical effects: rhythm, emphasis, memorability, order, unity, inevitability, moral force.
- Annotation question: What repeated pattern does the writer want the audience to remember or feel?

How to comment on parallelism

Weak: The writer uses parallel structure.

Stronger: The writer's parallel verbs create a rhythmic list of actions, making the problem seem repeated, systematic, and difficult to ignore.

Look for: repeated openings, repeated verb forms, balanced phrases, lists of three, matched clauses.

5. Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition places contrasting ideas, images, tones, people, or situations near each other. In syntax, the contrast often appears through sentence placement, paired clauses, antithesis, or a shift from one structure to another.

- Common rhetorical effects: contrast, irony, surprise, moral judgment, tension, sharpening the audience's perception of difference.
- Annotation question: What two ideas are placed side by side, and what does their closeness reveal?

Syntax pattern	What to mark	Possible effect
Paired clauses	Two clauses are set beside each other.	Highlights difference while making the comparison feel direct.

Syntax pattern	What to mark	Possible effect
Sentence shift	A long sentence is followed by a short one, or vice versa.	Changes pace and draws attention to the second idea.
Antithesis-like balance	Opposing ideas appear in a balanced structure.	Makes the contrast sound deliberate and memorable.

6. Rhetorical Questions

A rhetorical question is asked for effect rather than to get a literal answer. It can challenge the audience, imply an obvious answer, dramatize doubt, or guide readers toward the writer's conclusion.

- Common rhetorical effects: audience involvement, pressure, challenge, irony, moral urgency, transition into a claim.
- Annotation question: What answer does the writer expect, and how does the question position the audience?

Avoid the obvious

Weak: The writer asks a rhetorical question to make the reader think.

Stronger: The rhetorical question pressures the audience to supply the writer's implied answer, making disagreement feel unreasonable.

Stronger: The question interrupts the exposition and turns the audience from passive observers into participants in the judgment.

7. Quick Syntax Annotation Checklist

- Circle unusually short sentences. Ask: Why is this idea isolated?
- Bracket long or layered sentences. Ask: What relationships do the clauses create?
- Underline repeated grammatical patterns. Ask: What rhythm or emphasis does the repetition build?
- Draw arrows between contrasted clauses or sentences. Ask: What difference is being sharpened?
- Put a question mark beside rhetorical questions. Ask: What answer is implied, and how does the audience get pushed?
- Write one effect word in the margin: forceful, urgent, balanced, ironic, reflective, accusatory, complex, controlled.

8. From Annotation to AP-Style Commentary

Level	Example comment	Why it works or does not work
Label-only	The writer uses a complex sentence.	Too general; it identifies syntax but does not explain effect.
Better	The complex sentence shows that the issue has many parts.	Explains a basic effect, but still needs a sharper connection to purpose.
AP-level	By placing the opposing view in a dependent clause and the main claim in the independent clause, the writer minimizes the objection while foregrounding his own argument.	Names the structure, explains how it works, and connects syntax to rhetorical purpose.

Final reminder

Ask: Why this sentence design here, and how does it move the audience?