

AP Lang against AP Lit: the comparison and the exam formats

	AP English Language (Lang)	AP English Literature (Lit)
Studies	rhetoric and argument: how writers persuade	literature: how fiction, poetry and drama make meaning
Reads	nonfiction: speeches, essays, letters, memoir, journalism, visual texts	novels, short stories, poetry, drama
Writes	synthesis, rhetorical analysis, argument	poetry analysis, prose analysis, literary argument
Skills	purpose and audience, rhetorical choices, evidence, thesis and line of reasoning, sources	close reading of language, structure, character, tone, point of view; interpretation with evidence
Typical year	11th grade	12th grade
Stands in for	first-year composition	introduction to literature
Fit	future scientists, engineers, business, law, anyone who writes academic argument	English, humanities, arts, education; readers of fiction and poetry

The exams side by side

	AP Lang	AP Lit
Section I	45 multiple choice, 1 h, 45%: 23-25 reading questions on nonfiction + 20-22 writing (revision) questions	55 multiple choice, 1 h, 45%: 5 passage sets (at least 2 poems, at least 2 prose fiction, drama possible)
Section II	3 essays, 2 h 15 min (15-min reading period), 55%	3 essays, 2 h, 55%
Essay 1	Synthesis: 6-7 sources, use at least 3 in an argument	Poetry analysis
Essay 2	Rhetorical analysis of a nonfiction passage	Prose fiction (or drama) analysis
Essay 3	Argument: defend a position with your own evidence	Literary argument on a work of your choice
Rubric	each essay 0-6: 1 thesis, 4 evidence and commentary, 1 sophistication	the same
Total; format	3 h 15 min; digital in Bluebook	3 h; digital in Bluebook

From

sciencewithshobha.com/blog/ap-lang-vs-ap-lit-the-difference-what-each-course-and-exam-covers-the-formats-side-by-side-the-2025-and-2026-score-distribution

s-which-is-harder-which-to-take-first-and-how-colleges-treat-them/ · 1-on-1 online science and AP tutoring, KS2 to A level, Grades 5 to 12, free 30-minute first class.

Score distributions, college credit, and a decision checklist

College Board	5	4	3	2	1	3+	Students	Mean
AP Lang 2026 (prelim.)	15%	28%	32%	15%	10%	75%		
AP Lang 2025	13.4%	28.0%	32.8%	16.1%	9.7%	74.3%	616,294	3.19
AP Lang 2024	9.8%	21.4%	23.5%	28.8%	16.6%	54.6%	597,097	2.79
AP Lit 2026 (prelim.)	16%	26%	31%	16%	11%	73%		
AP Lit 2025	16.2%	26.9%	31.0%	15.9%	10.0%	74.2%	416,531	3.24
AP Lit 2024	13.7%	26.9%	31.8%	16.5%	11.1%	72.4%	389,272	3.16

Lang is the most-taken AP exam. Its pass rate jumped from 55% to 74% in 2025 when the College Board reset its standards; Lit has been near 72-78% since 2022. On today's numbers the two are equally passable; Lit gives slightly more 5s. Articles calling Lang the harder exam quote pre-2025 figures.

If you...	Probably easier
read novels and poetry for pleasure; notice imagery and tone	AP Lit
follow news, debate, like defending a position	AP Lang
write quickly and structurally; dislike ambiguity	AP Lang
like interpreting; tolerate several readings of one line	AP Lit
strong reader, slower writer	AP Lit
strong writer, less reading stamina	AP Lang
learning English as an additional language	AP Lang first

Score	AP Lang typically	AP Lit typically
5	first-year composition credit (3-6 credits), sometimes placement past a second writing course	introductory literature credit, sometimes composition too
4	composition credit at most colleges	literature or humanities elective credit at most
3	credit at many state universities; placement only at many selective colleges	credit at many state universities; often none at selective colleges
Both	some colleges cap English credit at one course; others credit both	

Decision checklist

- ☐ Which does my school offer, and in which grade? (Usual: Lang in 11th, Lit in 12th)
- ☐ Will my major involve academic writing? (Lang) Is it English, humanities, arts or education? (Lit)
- ☐ Do I read fiction and poetry willingly? (Lit) Do I enjoy argument and current affairs? (Lang)
- ☐ Do my target colleges give credit for both, or cap English at one course? (Check each AP credit policy)
- ☐ Can I carry two essay-writing courses in one year, or is a two-year sequence wiser?