

Strategies for Mastering the Persuasive Essay

AP Language and Composition

Becky Talk, Cushing H.S.

On the AP Language exam, the persuasive essay calls for a different set of skills than does the rhetorical analysis essay. Two difficult areas on the persuasive essay for my students are

- offering credible, appropriate evidence to support their claims
- understanding the difference between defending, challenging, or qualifying their claims

Over the last few years, the persuasive prompt has been worded in a variety of ways. Typically the prompt asks students to defend, challenge, or qualify an assertion and states that evidence may come from the student's experience, observation, or reading. However it is worded, it is imperative that students learn to read the prompt carefully and do exactly what it says to do.

Look at the different ways the persuasive prompt has been worded over the past ten years.

2000: 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 on the relationship between wealth and justice. Support your argument with specific references to your reading, observation, or experience.

2001: Carefully read the following passage by Susan Sontag. Then write an essay in which you support, refute, or qualify Sontag's claim that photography limits our understanding of the world. Use appropriate evidence to develop your argument.

2002: Carefully read the following passage from *Testaments Betrayed*, by the Czech writer Milan Kundera. Then write an essay in which you support, qualify, or dispute Kundera's claim. Support your argument with appropriate evidence.

2003: 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.

Notice the subtle differences in the wording of the prompt after 2003:

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.

2005: 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.

2006: Write an essay in which you take a position on the value of . . . public statements of opinion ("talk radio," "television shows," "popular magazines," "Web blogs," "ordinary citizens," "political figures," "entertainers") supporting your view with appropriate evidence.

2007: 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, observation, and/or experience.

2008: 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,

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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.

Last year, the prompt looked more like it has looked before 2004:

2009: 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.

2010: 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.

The fact that the wording of the persuasive prompt has varied over the years argues that students must not develop pre-conceived ideas about what the prompt will look like but be prepared to deal with the prompt as it appears on the page in May.

Using Appropriate Evidence in the Persuasive Essay

Look at how the requirements for evidence have been worded in the last ten years of the exam:

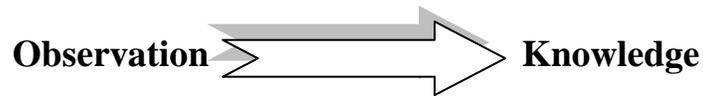
- 2000:** Support your argument with specific references to your reading, observation, or experience.
- 2001:** Use appropriate evidence to develop your argument.
- 2002:** Support your argument with appropriate evidence.
- 2003:** Use specific evidence.
- 2004:** Use appropriate evidence.
- 2005:** Support your argument with appropriate evidence.
- 2006:** Support your view with appropriate evidence.
- 2007:** Support your position with evidence from your reading, observation, and/or experience.
- 2008:** Using appropriate evidence, write an essay....

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What does it mean to offer evidence from your observations, experience, or reading?



Use your knowledge of any specialized subject, such as

- history
- current events
- science
- technology
- music
- sports
- human behavior

You can either use this knowledge in a way that directly applies to the subject (if that's appropriate to the subject), or you can create an analogy between this specialized knowledge and your persuasive prompt.

Look at the 2009 exam persuasive prompt again:

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.

If you were developing an analogy using your knowledge of how muscle mass is produced, you might write something like the following example:

The fact that pain and stress create growth is true in both the physical and psychological realm. For instance, stress and even trauma are required to increase muscle mass. Those who lift weights know that when you stress a muscle, you create tiny tears in the muscle fiber. These tears activate cells which begin to replace damaged muscle fibers. These new cells fuse to muscle fibers to form new protein strands, which increases the muscle cells in thickness and in number. In the same way that muscles grow only with stress and trauma, human beings grow psychologically only by developing new "muscles" in dealing with adversity.

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The following is several paragraphs of an essay which earned an “8” on this prompt. Underline the evidence in the essay. Then in the margins, label the kind of specialized knowledge (observations) the student is using. Note also where the student relies on his/her reading for evidence.

An old proverb states, “Character is what you are in the dark,” and it is in the darkest of times that who we are sometimes shines through. Nelson Mandela, Stephen Hawking, Lance Armstrong; our society loves to hear of a man who triumphs through adversity. But would these talents and achievement have arisen anyway—or more easily—if there had been no adversity? Possibly, but I agree with the Roman poet Horace in that adversity has a way of rousing talent from slumber. Adversity can stimulate, force, and sharpen a person in ways prosperity cannot—there is, then, value in hardship.

Biology teaches us that a stimulus will elicit a response. Newton taught us that one force provokes another, in opposition to it. While various life experiences might “elicit” a response, adversity may analogize better with physics than biology. It does not simply request a response—it demands it. Otherwise the adversity will never be lifted and hardship will prevail. Hamlet’s tragic flaw was indecision, and Shakespeare no doubt understood that those in adversity must learn to be capable of a response if they are to survive.

Survival, of course, is a powerful motivator. Evolution runs on it; in this sense every organism on the planet works due to adversity. This survival imperative is so powerful, it has been used beyond the biological creatures it is hard-coded into. Computers now make use of genetic algorithms, where competing solutions to a problem—say, the correct shape of an aircraft wing—are selected, mathematically “bred,” and mutated into a new generation. Adversity, it seems, elicits talents in more than humans.

Prosperity, on the other hand, does not always engender growth. The prosperous man has no pressing needs or emergencies that require him to develop talents to counter. *Brave New World* provides a literary example. The people in this “utopia” are always fed. They are always happy. There is infinite entertainment, in all imaginable forms. But there is no growth. When the leader of this society asks an outsider if he truly wants pain, death,

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and hardship, the “savage” simply replied, “I claim them all,” and took with him all the good things the “prosperous” lacked—love, family, Shakespeare, and much more.

In fiction, a character often ends a story realizing far more than he did when he began. The conflicts and resolutions he has been through have forced it on him. Character development is not merely a literary construct—it exists in life. We cannot live and we cannot grow living perfectly and that we have ideals to grow towards, the revealing these is the true value of adversity.

Experience

The Chief Reader had this to say about using students’ own experiences as evidence:

“Through extensive reading, discussion, and writing, students will come to recognize a world larger than their own immediate experience. Rather than considering the broader implications of Horace’s quotation, many students focused on proximal causes because those were conveniently near. Teachers need to help students understand the usefulness of a global view, to increase their awareness of the world beyond their own. Students need to recognize that examples drawn from a wider world may be stronger [than their own personal experiences]...When relating their personal experiences, students need to be mindful of the public nature of most argumentation. In such a context, the primary purpose of a personal narrative is rhetorical, not confessional.”

Part of your *ethos* as a writer is to select appropriate personal experiences if you choose to use them as evidence.

Look at the 2007 exam persuasive prompt:

A weekly feature of *The New York Times Magazine* is a column by Randy Cohen called “The Ethicist,” in which people raise 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 sends a morally wrong message, undermining the value of charity as a selfless act. Is the exchange of donations for grades O.K.?

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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, observation, and/or experience.

Here are two paragraphs from a student's essay scoring an "8." Notice how the student uses personal experience as evidence.

When a popular local restaurant recently gave our English class pens emblazoned with their names, and coupons on a class outing, we jokingly exclaimed, "They're sponsoring AP English!" However, what we failed to recognize at the time was the effect this one company had on us. This restaurant has since been associated with AP English, and it is no wonder similar corporations hope to achieve the same effect by "sponsoring" schools.

My experience has shown that a lack of corporate sponsorship is the right decision for a school to make. In middle school, we were constantly bombarded by Kraft products and events in-school because the corporate headquarters just happened to be minutes away. Ironically, my overexposure to Kraft has trained me to look upon their products with discontent, and my middle school experience is now characterized by Kraft and not the education I received. An environment free from ads is rare to find nowadays, but it can thankfully be found in my high school, leading me to believe that the detriments of corporate advertising in-school far outweigh the benefits. I am convinced that a school should be about education, not about the posters and ads that embellish it.

Qualifying an Assertion in the Persuasive Essay

Often the strongest persuasive essays are those in which the writer qualifies an assertion rather than strictly defending or challenging it. When you qualify, you force yourself to look at an issue from more angles than one and to view it from the vantage point of both sides. Qualifying an assertion shows you to be a person who considers points of view other than your own and a person who respects others' opinions, all traits which develop your character and credibility as a writer, or your *ethos*. Students should be aware that rarely is any issue in the public forum cut and dried, right or wrong, black or white. To produce more sophisticated and finessed essays, students should learn how to qualify an assertion.

To defend an assertion is to agree with it; to challenge is to disagree with it. To qualify is distinctly more complicated because qualifying demands that students assess the nuances and complexities of the assertion. Often the highest-scoring papers qualify because these students have thought through the complexities inherent in any tenable assertion. Look at some of the prompts appearing on past Language exams, and note that they all deal with issues that could be supported with evidence on each side. (The prompts have been paraphrased.)

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- Wealthy people can buy their justice in our courts system.
- Photography does not present an accurate view of the world.
- The entertainment business is ruining society.
- One's spoken language is a key to his/her identity.
- Americans are more materialistic than people in other countries.
- One's personal identity is bound up in that person's external appearance and possessions.
- Our freedom is endangered when the government does not respect our basic right to privacy.

In each of these assertions, reasonable people can disagree. And each of these assertions represents a complicated interplay of ideas and beliefs. The more educated and civilized a society becomes, the more its citizens should be able to discern that most issues in the public forum cannot be simplistically stated. Thus, it becomes important for students to learn to *qualify* their position when they are defending an assertion or position. Qualifying deals with "on the one hand" and "on the other hand" reasoning. The term has come to mean "adapt the argument so that it doesn't necessarily have a one-side-or-the-other spin" (David Jolliffe email). Since most (if not all) issues have two valid sides, reasonable people, people developing their *ethos* in public or written discourse, should be able to modify their own argument to reflect both sides of the issue. Qualifying, however, does *not* mean showing both sides of an issue and then leaving it there. In a persuasive essay, the writer's purpose is to change the audience's mind or to at least offer compelling evidence why a certain position is valid. So if students merely present equal evidence on both sides of the issue, their purpose has changed from **persuasion**—attempting to sway someone's opinion—to **exposition**—explaining an issue.

Below is an assertion with sample paragraphs defending, challenging, and qualifying the assertion. In these paragraphs, note that the "defend" and "challenge" paragraphs deal with only one side of the issue. The "qualify" paragraph addresses some of the complexities inherent in most issues in the public forum. This paragraph modifies the assertion to extend its focus only to certain situations.

Assertion: Laws which protect citizens from themselves are justified.

Defend:

Our forefathers determined that it is the business of the government to provide all that shall affect our "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Democracy works because the people have entrusted that power to their elected officials. It is government's right, yes, and its duty to enact laws that best protect and preserve the lives of Americans. Therefore, the government, through our elected officials, has the right to protect citizens and to make judgments regarding how best to protect citizens from themselves. Because society will have to pay (through health and mental care) for a person who harms himself, society has the right to limit a person's rights when he tries to harm himself.

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Challenge:

All human beings are distinct entities, possessing a spirit, soul, and body. The right to make private decisions affecting one's life is a precious one. Any government, even in its best intentions, never has the right to impose its will on its citizens, even when it proposes to protect them from themselves. According to the values of our country, people should have the "liberty" to choose "life" or "happiness" on their own terms.

What is a concession?

A concession is an expression of concern for those who do not agree with you. Using concession is a good way to develop your *ethos*, or your credibility and character with your audience. Using concession shows your audience that you are a fair-minded person, one who recognizes that any issue has two sides. Read the paragraph below. The concession is bolded.

Defend or challenge with a concession:

Our forefathers determined that it is the business of the government to provide all that shall affect our "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Democracy works because the people have entrusted that power to their elected officials. It is government's right, yes, and its duty to enact laws that best protect and preserve the lives of Americans. Therefore, the government, through our elected officials, has the right to protect citizens and to make judgments regarding how best to protect citizens from themselves. **Civil libertarians might argue that the right to make private decisions affecting one's life is a precious one, one that government has no right to intrude upon. They would say that any government, even in its best intentions, never has the right to impose its will on its citizens, even when it purposes to protect them from themselves.** Yet society will have to pay (through health and mental care) for a person who harms himself. Therefore, society has the ultimate right and duty to limit a person's rights when he tries to harm himself.

Qualify:

The Declaration of Independence states that all Americans have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Therefore, it can be argued that our right to "life" sometimes hinges on the government protecting us from ourselves. Thus we have laws such as those prohibiting the sale of alcohol to minors and requiring us to wear seat belts in automobiles. Sometimes city, state, or national governments go too far, however, in determining just how Americans should be protected. Some cities have banned trans fats in restaurants, for instance. When a law crosses over the line from protecting Americans' lives and begins to interfere with their liberties, then that law has gone too far. Laws which protect citizens from themselves are justified as long as those laws do not infringe upon individual liberty.

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In 2002 and 2005, a student's results on the persuasive prompt depended to a large extent on how well the students READ the prompt.

2002 Exam

Carefully read the following passage from *Testaments Betrayed* by the Czech writer Milan Kundera. Then write an essay in which you support, qualify, or dispute Kundera's claim. Support your argument with appropriate evidence.

I wrote about this in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: Jan Prochazka, an important figure of the Prague Spring, came under heavy surveillance after the Russian invasion of 1968. At the time, he saw a good deal of another great opposition figure, Professor Vaclav Cerny, with whom he liked to drink and talk. All their conversations were secretly recorded, and I suspect the two friends knew it and didn't give a damn. But one day in 1970 or 1971, with the intent to discredit Prochazka, the police began to broadcast these conversations as a radio serial. For the police it was an audacious, unprecedented act. And, surprisingly: it nearly succeeded; instantly Prochazka *was* discredited: because in private, a person says all sorts of things, slurs friends, uses coarse language, acts silly, tells dirty jokes, repeats himself, makes a companion laugh by shocking him with outrageous talk, floats heretical ideas he'd never admit in public, and so forth. Of course, we all act like Prochazka, in private we badmouth our friends and use coarse language; that we act different in private than in public is everyone's most conspicuous experience, it is the very ground of the life of the individual; curiously, this obvious fact remains unconscious, unacknowledged, forever obscured by lyrical dreams of the transparent glass house, it is rarely understood to be the value one must defend beyond all others. Thus only gradually did people realize (though their rage was all the greater) that the real scandal was not Prochazka's daring talk but the rape of his life; they realized (as if by electric shock) that private and public are two essentially different worlds and that respect for that difference is the indispensable condition, the *sine qua non*, for a man to live free; that the curtain separating these two worlds is not to be tampered with, and that curtain-rippers are criminals. (1995)

2005 Exam

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.

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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.

Common Errors in Persuasive Writing

This prompt appeared on the 2003 Exam B exam. Scott Russell Sanders appeared again on the 2007 exam in the rhetorical analysis question.

The following passage comes from “The Common Life,” a 1994 essay by the American writer Scott Russell Sanders. Read the passage carefully and then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Sanders’ ideas about the relationship between the individual and society in the United States. Use specific evidence to support your position.

A woman who recently moved from Los Angeles to Bloomington [Indiana] told me that she would not be able to stay here long, because she was already beginning to recognize people in the grocery stores, on the sidewalks, in the library. Being surrounded by familiar faces made her nervous, after years in a city where she could range about anonymously. Every traveler knows the sense of liberation that comes from journeying to a place where nobody expects anything of you. Everyone who has gone to college knows the exhilaration of slipping away from the watchful eyes of Mom and Dad. We all need seasons of withdrawal from responsibility. But if we make a career of being unaccountable, we have lost something essential to our humanity, and we may well become a burden or a threat to those around us. A community can support a number of people who are just passing through, or who care about no one’s needs but their own; the greater the proportion of such people, however, the more vulnerable the community, until eventually it breaks down....Taking part in the common life means dwelling in a web of relationships, the many threads tugging at you while also holding you upright.

Common errors in writing this essay:

1. Not understanding the task or the directions
2. Merely paraphrasing the passage
3. Not taking a definite stand

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4. Using inappropriate or weak evidence to support your position
5. Writing a stylistic analysis of the passage instead of a persuasive essay

Problem #1: not understanding the task or the directions

Make sure that you read the passage correctly and understand your task. Don't get caught up in tangential issues. Figure out what Sanders's central thesis is. This student had trouble understanding the issue:

For example, when people get caught doing something wrong and they don't want to admit to their mistakes, they sometimes think of a lie, which is a defense mechanism people use when in trouble. Who hasn't lied at some time in their lives? The guilt will haunt the lady in the passage who moved to Bloomington, tearing up everything in her life from inside then out.

The example about the woman from Bloomington is not the central issue in this prompt—it is an example Sanders is giving to make his point. What really is his issue?

Write the central point he is making, the point that you are to defend, challenge, or qualify.

Problem #2: merely paraphrasing the passage

If your whole essay consists of explaining what Sanders is saying in this passage, the best score you can possibly make is a 4 out of a 9. Resist the temptation to tell what the passage is saying. The readers know what the passage says. Refer to the passage in as few words as possible. Do not quote long sections of the passage—this eats up time and accomplishes very little. Your job is to figure out what the central issue is and then to defend, challenge, or qualify that issue.

In this passage, Sanders writes about the relationship between the individual and society. He talks about a lady that moved from Los Angeles to Bloomington, Indiana. She says she would not be able to stay long because she was already beginning to recognize people. Sanders writes that the lady gets nervous when she is recognized. She liked not being known and not having to get involved in that society. Sanders says that a couple of people like this help society run, but if there were too many, society would collapse. Society depends on some people to interact so that it can keep going.

If this were only the introduction, and the student followed up with an assertion that defended, challenged, or qualified Sanders's assertion, this paragraph would be acceptable, although it's not necessary to paraphrase this much. But when a paraphrase is your whole essay, you're looking at a score of 4, at best.

Problem #3: not taking a definite stand

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This is one of the most common errors students make. A persuasive essay is an argumentative essay—you must have a definite opinion and state that opinion unequivocally.

Sanders describes the relationship between the individual and society as a contrast. The individual is nervous around a too-familiar society. A society feels threatened by a great number of individuals that are unfamiliar. In a big city, most people become accustomed to unknown people because of the large population. However, in a small town where everybody knows everybody else, a newcomer might be seen as a threat to their way of life. In a small community, most people have their familiar routines. For the traveler, though, it is still a new opportunity for the community. The unknown traveler may be thought of as an alteration to their everyday routine.

This essay discusses the workings of a small town and a big city and makes some interesting observations about the contrast. The writer, however, never takes a definite stand on whether or not it is healthy to remove oneself completely from society.

This writer takes a definite stand and backs it up with appropriate evidence:

*Sanders says that “we all need seasons of withdrawal from responsibility.” There are times when people need to forget about what others expect from them and do only what they feel is needed. (**concession**) While Sanders’s statements are true, people cannot live a responsibility-dodging life forever. He feels that if people are to do so, “We will have lost something essential to our humanity.” If everyone were to give up their responsibilities and do only what was best for themselves, then society would not function. Organizations would fall apart because people would no longer be able to work together. Eventually our entire government would break down and the nation would erupt into total chaos. The more careless people a community has, “the more vulnerable” the community becomes. Thus, people must learn to take responsibility for themselves rather than dodge it. (**assertion**)*

Problem #4: using inappropriate or weak evidence to support your position

The strength of your essay almost totally depends on the strength of the evidence you marshal for your position. Weak or inappropriate evidence will produce a weak paper and a low score. The readers are looking for writers to write logically, to reason, to analyze, to find the best evidence to convince someone of their position. This student’s evidence has to do with crime rates:

A small town culture is often seen as boring and old-fashioned, but it is just as important to our nation as any of the modern big cities. In New York City people have that opportunity to wander the city anonymously. Perhaps that is the reason why crime rates are so much higher in larger cities. People are far less likely to behave badly

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if people they know are watching them. This constant concern of others judging you is perhaps more beneficial than some may have you believe. It can get quite nerve-wracking to always be under watch, but those that watch you also come to your aid in times of need. For example, when you go out of town you can ask your ever-watchful neighbors to keep an eye on your house for peace of mind. If everyone went around with a total disregard for others, society would break down and the world would become a terrible almost primal place.

This student effectively supports his position by reasoning that knowing someone is watching you may deter crime. He concedes (another way to reason logically) that it is bothersome to “always be under watch,” but those who watch you also watch over you.

Problem #5: writing a stylistic analysis of the passage instead of a persuasive essay

Your job is not to analyze the way Sanders writes. Your job is to write a persuasive essay.

Sanders’s use of diction reveals his negative attitude toward wanderers....

Sanders uses a word with negative connotations when describing the twisting threads....

Sanders was accurate when he said the many threads tug, yet hold one another upright. His metaphor identified individual lives as threads. The metaphor makes the reader reflect to a special blanket or person that brought them comfort, evoking emotional reactions.

Sanders is offering an opinion in this passage. You are to either agree with his opinion, disagree with his opinion, or qualify his opinion. Do not analyze the way Sanders writes.