



A Guide for Parents: AP, the College Board, and Our Curriculum

We know that parents considering CLASSICAL for the high school years often have questions about Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Many high schools treat AP courses as the gold standard of academic rigor, and it is entirely reasonable for a family to ask: Why doesn't CLASSICAL offer more of them? This document is our honest, considered answer. We hope it helps you understand not only what AP is, but why we have made the deliberate choice to chart a course offering a limited number of carefully-selected AP courses.

What Is the College Board?

The College Board is a private, nonprofit organization headquartered in New York City. It administers several well-known programs used in American secondary and higher education, including the SAT, PSAT, and the Advanced Placement (AP) program. Despite its name, it is not a government agency and has no formal accrediting authority. It sets its own standards, develops its own curricula, and charges fees to students, schools, and institutions that participate in its programs.

The College Board wields enormous influence over American secondary education. Thousands of high schools structure their most advanced courses around College Board frameworks. In recent years, however, a growing number of educators, scholars, and policymakers have raised serious concerns about the organization's direction and its effect on genuine learning.

For those who wish to read further, the following articles offer perspectives from a wide range of commentators:

- **"AP Classes Are a Scam"** (The Atlantic)
- **"The College Board Is Rotting"** (Commentary Magazine)
- **"How the College Board Became America's Censorship Board"** (Washington Times)
- **"The College Board Has Too Much Control Over AP Classes"** (Texas Public Policy Foundation)
- **"How AP Cheats Students"** (Forbes)

How Does the AP Program Work?

Each AP course is designed by the College Board, which publishes a detailed framework specifying what content must be covered, how students should be assessed throughout the year, and what skills they must demonstrate. At the end of the academic year, students take a standardized AP examination, typically three hours long, administered nationally on a fixed date.

AP exams are scored on a scale of 1 to 5. Many colleges and universities grant credit or advanced standing to students who score a 3, 4, or 5 on an exam, though policies vary widely by institution. The promise of college credit is the central selling point of the AP program for most families.

In practice, the exam at the end of the year shapes everything that happens inside an AP classroom throughout the year. Teachers work through the College Board's mandated content at a rapid pace so that students have encountered every topic that might appear on the exam. The curriculum, pacing, and even the structure of essays and written responses are oriented toward earning points according to the College Board's scoring rubrics.

Seven elite private schools in Washington, D.C. dropped the AP program several years ago. In their words: *"College courses, which demand critical thinking and rigorous analysis, look nothing like AP courses, which stress breadth over depth."*

Why Does CLASSICAL Offer Some AP Courses and Not Others?

CLASSICAL does not view the AP label as a synonym for rigor. We believe that genuine rigor is found in the depth of engagement with foundational ideas, in the quality of discussion and writing, and in the formation of habits of careful thought. None of those qualities require AP certification.

That being said, we recognize that certain disciplines have a natural affinity with the AP framework, while others do not. Our decision to offer or decline AP designations in any given subject rests on the following criteria:

Subjects Where AP May Be Appropriate

In the following areas, the AP exam tests objective knowledge or skill that aligns reasonably well with genuine mastery, and where the College Board's framework does not significantly distort our curriculum:

- **Mathematics and Science.** The content of the AP exam aligns with mastery of objective material (e.g., calculus, physics, chemistry, biology, statistics)
- **Foreign Languages.** The exam tests foreign language proficiency rather than ideological frameworks or subjective rubrics.
- **Studio Art and Music Theory.** The College Board's framework in these areas does not require us to crowd out foundational depth or substitute excerpts for complete works.

In these subjects, a student who has genuinely mastered our curriculum will be well positioned to perform well on the AP exam without compromising the integrity of the course itself.

Subjects Where AP Is Incompatible with Our Mission

In the following areas, the structure and philosophy of the AP program conflict with what we believe genuine education in that discipline requires:

- **History.** AP History courses must cover an enormous volume of material in a single year. This produces exactly the race through topics that classical education rejects. Our history courses are organized around primary sources and sustained engagement with the great events and ideas of each era.
- **Literature and Humanities.** AP Literature courses train students to analyze short excerpts using rubric-driven essay structures. Our literature courses are built around the reading of complete works in their

entirety. A student cannot encounter the full meaning of Homer or Dante through passages selected for an exam.

- **Philosophy and Social Sciences.** AP courses in these areas often embed contemporary theoretical frameworks that ask students to read texts primarily through the lens of power, identity, and social critique. We believe students should encounter great works on their own terms before applying any critical lens.

An important note on curriculum governance: CLASSICAL was intentionally founded with Hillsdale College as our curriculum partner. Adopting the AP program in our humanities and classical studies courses would effectively transfer curricular authority to the College Board, an external body whose values and priorities do not reflect our mission.

Isn't AP the Mark of a Serious School?

This is perhaps the most important question a parent can ask, and it deserves a direct answer.

The widespread assumption that AP courses define academic seriousness is understandable. For decades, college admissions offices have rewarded AP enrollment, and secondary schools have responded by offering as many AP sections as possible. The signal has become so common that many families now equate the absence of AP with a lack of ambition or rigor.

We ask parents to consider a different measure: the actual substance of what students read, discuss, write, and think about from kindergarten through twelfth grade. At CLASSICAL, academic seriousness does not begin in eleventh grade when AP courses typically appear. It begins in the earliest years, when students are reading carefully, learning Latin, engaging with primary sources, and developing habits of genuine inquiry.

Compare our core curriculum at any grade level with the core curriculum of any local high school, AP-heavy or otherwise. The question of which is more demanding will answer itself.

Brookings Institution scholars examining the AP program have questioned whether its expansion has diluted its academic value and whether it has distorted the meaning of rigor in American high schools. The concern is not that AP students are lazy or unserious. It is that the program itself encourages the wrong kind of seriousness: performance on a test rather than depth of formation.

OUR PLANNED AP OFFERINGS IN GRADES 10–12

AP Art History (11, 12)

AP Art + Design (12)

AP Biology (11, 12) – *may add in 10 in 2027–28*

AP Calculus AB (12)

AP Calculus BC (12)

AP Chemistry (11, 12)

AP Statistics (11, 12) – *may add in 10 in 2027–28*

AP French (12)

AP Latin (10, 11, 12)

AP Music Composition (11, 12)

AP Music Theory (10, 11, 12)

AP Physics: Algebra–Based (12)

AP Spanish (12) *once the sequence is introduced*

Why Our Core Courses Are As Good or (Usually) Better

The following comparison illustrates the key differences between how our core courses are structured and how comparable AP courses are structured.

Dimension	CLASSICAL Core Courses	Typical AP Course
Texts	Complete works read in their entirety	Excerpts and selected passages chosen for exam relevance
Pacing	Unhurried; students return to difficult passages and linger over ideas	Rapid coverage of large amounts of content to prepare for a May exam
Assessment	Essays, Socratic discussion, written argument, oral defense	Standardized multiple-choice and rubric-scored essays
Curriculum control	CLASSICAL and Hillsdale College K-12	The College Board
Goal of instruction	Formation of habits of careful thought and genuine understanding	Preparation for a high-stakes standardized examination
Writing	Students learn to argue persuasively and think clearly	Students learn to satisfy a scoring rubric
Canon	Great works selected for enduring literary and philosophical depth	Works increasingly selected for representational or thematic diversity

What About Getting College Credit?

One of the most common reasons parents value AP courses is the prospect of earning college credit before graduation from high school. This is a legitimate consideration, and we want to address it honestly.

The actual value of AP credit depends heavily on the college a student attends. Many selective universities either do not accept AP credit toward core requirements or grant only elective credit. Some institutions have moved away from accepting AP credit altogether, precisely because they have found that students who received credit in a given subject often lack the foundation the course was meant to provide.

More fundamentally, we ask parents to consider a question that is rarely posed: **should the purpose of high school be to get through college faster?** A student who arrives at college having genuinely mastered the skills of careful reading, rigorous argument, and precise writing is better prepared for college than a student who arrives with a handful of credits earned by performing well on standardized examinations. The college years are not something to be shortened. They are an opportunity to be fully inhabited.

Finally, keep in mind that college financial planning is a broader conversation that should not dictate our educational decisions as a school. There are many effective avenues to achieve financial aid and college affordability without relying on AP courses.

Our position: We are not in a race to outpace the future. The opportunity to attend school, and later college, during one's youthful years should be cherished and done well. These are years that will not return. A student who has been genuinely formed by a classical education will thrive in college and beyond.

What Should Parents Make of This?

We understand that choosing a school with fewer AP courses than others requires a measure of trust. The conventional signals of academic prestige are woven into the college admissions process, and it takes real confidence to step outside a familiar framework. But it is worth pointing out: **College admissions officers are always looking for students who stand out from the crowd, not necessarily those who conform best.**

We offer the following for parents who are weighing this question:

- CLASSICAL graduates will be well prepared for college. Students who have read the great books, learned to argue from evidence, studied Latin, and engaged in genuine Socratic discussion arrive at college with advantages that no exam score can easily measure.
- Our curriculum has been developed in partnership with Hillsdale College, one of the most academically rigorous liberal arts institutions in the country. Their involvement is a mark of the seriousness with which we take our academic program.
- We are happy to compare our course of study, grade by grade, with any other school in the region. We invite that comparison.
- If you have questions about how graduates from other Hillsdale College K-12 member schools have fared in college admissions or in their college coursework, we encourage you to visit our College & Career Readiness page on our website.

We do not expect every family to agree with every choice we have made. We do ask that every family understand the reasoning behind those choices. The purpose of this document is precisely that: not to convince, but to explain.

Questions? We welcome the conversation.

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