How to get a kid ready for AP courses, starting years before

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What AP is, which of the 42 courses exist in 2026, when to start, and the reading, writing and math habits that make a first AP course manageable.

AP is a menu of college-level courses, not a single test, and a kid gets ready for it over years by building three habits: reading closely, writing from evidence, and doing algebra without fear. College Board lists 42 AP courses on its student site as of 7 November 2026. Nobody takes them all. This post says what is on the menu, when to start, what to do in the years before, and where the free material is.

What is on the menu

The 42 courses fall into eight groups: ten in history and social sciences, two in English, six in math and computer science, seven in sciences, eight in world languages and cultures, five in the arts, two in AP Capstone (Seminar and Research) and two in AP Career Kickstart (Business with Personal Finance and Cybersecurity). College Board also lists AP Networking as "available 2027-28", so it has no exam yet. The full list, checked against College Board's pages, is in our AP course directory and the plan behind this post is in our AP prep plan.

Each course ends in an exam in May, scored 1 to 5. Whether a score earns college credit is each college's decision, so the useful move is to look up the AP policy of two or three colleges your child might apply to. We can't tell you what any score will earn.

When to start

There is no age rule. Most students take a first AP in 9th or 10th grade, and two or three a year in 11th and 12th is common; those are typical patterns, not College Board rules. The course pages mostly list no formal prerequisite. The one we checked word for word: AP Computer Science Principles and AP Computer Science A "require you to have familiarity with concepts from Algebra 1" and "do not require any computer science or coding experience."

So a first AP can be a gentle one. A kid who reads well can try AP Psychology or AP Human Geography. A kid who likes building can try AP Computer Science Principles. A kid heading toward work in tech or business can look at the Career Kickstart courses; College Board's page says the AP Business with Personal Finance exam is on 4 May 2027 and AP Cybersecurity on 5 May 2027.

The three habits to build in middle school

1. Read closely. A book a month, and one page of notes in the margin or a notebook: what is the author claiming, and what is the proof? Peabody's story library has free stories at each reading level for the daily reading part.
2. Write from evidence. A page a day, and one short argument essay each quarter that makes a claim and backs it with a quote or a fact. Nearly every AP exam in English, history and social science asks for this.
3. Be fluent in math before you need it. Fractions and ratios by 7th, Algebra 1 done well by 9th. Most of the pain in AP science and calculus is algebra that wasn't solid.

A fourth, for languages: start one in 6th to 8th grade. The language courses expect several years of study, and Peabody doesn't teach foreign languages yet.

A ladder to follow

- Grade: 6 to 8 · Do this: The three habits. Algebra 1 by 8th or 9th. One language begun.
- Grade: 9 · Do this: World History, Physical Science, Algebra 1 or Geometry, English 9. One first AP if ready.
- Grade: 10 · Do this: Biology, Geometry or Algebra 2, English 10 with a research paper. AP World or European History, AP Computer Science.
- Grade: 11 · Do this: Chemistry, Algebra 2 or Precalculus. AP English Language, AP US History, AP Statistics or a lab science.
- Grade: 12 · Do this: AP English Literature, AP Calculus, AP Government, Economics, Physics C.

Peabody Homeschool has free high school courses for the base of that ladder: World History, US History, Civics and Economics, Algebra 1 and 2, Geometry, Physical Science, Biology, Chemistry and the English courses. They are free through 2026. The plan maps each one to the AP exam it feeds.

Free help first

College Board runs AP Classroom for students in an AP class, and each course page has public resources. Our directory of tutoring and course companies lists free and paid options with what each one's own site says, with no ranking and no endorsement. If you do hire a tutor, ask whether they know the exam format of that exact course, and ask for a trial session first.

One practical thing

An AP exam is taken at a school or an approved site, so ask a local school's AP coordinator in autumn, not in spring, whether an outside student can register. We haven't verified any school's policy, and they differ.

Start with the habits, pick one course that fits, and keep the stories coming; the library is a good place for the reading.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-to-get-a-kid-ready-for-ap-courses