Tips For Writing AP Biology Exam Essays and Short Answers
(Good ones, that is.)

1. The first thing that you should do is to carefully read the question. The second thing you should do is READ THE QUESTION, and the third thing you should do is read the question. Be sure you answer THIS question - the one that is asked - and not the one you hoped would be asked.

2. Answer ALL PARTS of the question. Each part has a point limit that you can score; you can't get all your points from one part, so spread it out if time is running short.

3. Outline the answer before you start writing (you get 10 minutes to do this before you are allowed to start writing in the answer booklet). This will get you organized and keep you from forgetting something as you write the answer. Use a minute or more of your writing time if you need to, but organization helps.

4. Write an ESSAY. Outline form will not be graded. Diagrams without explanations will not be graded. Exception - if you are asked to calculate a number (gene frequency, etc.) be sure to show how you got your answer, but you don't need to describe the process in complete sentences (but some words help).

5. Define biological terms, don't just use them. Convince the grader that you know what you are talking about. Don't use a term to define a term, e.g. the definition of independent assortment is not "when genes assort independently".

6. Answer the question you think you know best right away - you don't want to lose points on this one because you ran out of time. Make sure your essay answers are in the right part of the answer booklet. While you don't have to answer the essays in order, it is best to answer the parts of any one essay in the order that they are given. Remember - make it easy, not confusing, for the grader.

7. If a grader can't read your writing, they can't give you points. Write clearly and don't crowd words in or write vertically, etc.

8. Be sure to include the obvious (light is necessary for photosynthesis, for example), but go into as much detail as you can as long as it is not off topic. No detail is too small as long as it is to the point.

9. If you cannot remember a word exactly, take a shot at it, get as close as you can, but make sure to explain it as well, especially if it is a concept. Using the wrong word without an explanation will cast doubt in the mind of the scorer.

10. If you are asked to draw a diagram, make sure you label and describe it as well. If you choose to use a diagram without being asked to do so, put it right in the essay where you are writing about it (not at the end), and realize that it will get no points unless it is described and referred to in your essay.

11. Pace yourself - remember that you have about 22 minutes for each essay.

12. The test is supposed to be hard. The national average for each essay will be between 3 and 5 out of 10. You likely will not know everything, but you should (you better) know something. Relax and do the best you can.

13. If you are asked a conceptual question like "Relate Mendel's Laws to the events in meiosis." And you don't know the relationship or other concept asked, tell what you do know about the two topics individually. You will likely scratch out a few points, which is better than none.

1. DON'T write an introduction in which you just restate the question or summarize what you are going to write about - JUST WRITE THE ANSWER. Introductions waste your time and make graders grouchy.

2. DON'T panic if you are unfamiliar with the question. I doubt you will be TOTALLY unfamiliar with any question, but sometimes one word may throw you ("cephalization" was in a question in 2007). Be calm and think; I know you can say something about any question they might ask.

3. DON'T obsess and/or waste time with spelling or grammar. They can't give you points if they don't understand you, but small mistakes won't be counted against you.

4. Each essay point is worth almost as much as two multiple choice questions, and like the multiple choice section, on essays there is NO PENALTY for a wrong guess, so give it a shot. DON'T QUIT!!! Use every minute - a year's worth of effort is going into this one test. Your brain can recall some amazing things if you don't turn it off - give grey matter a chance!