

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2017 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	404,137		
• Number of Readers	1,018		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	27,455	6.8
	4	65,014	16.1
	3	120,101	29.7
	2	137,159	33.9
	1	54,408	13.5
• Global Mean	2.69		

The following comments on the 2017 free-response questions for AP[®] English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David Miller of Mississippi College. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student preparation in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question #1**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 3.88***What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?***

For Question 1, the poetry question, students were asked to read “The Myth of Music” by Rachel M. Harper and respond to the following prompt:

The following poem is by Rachel M. Harper. Read the poem carefully. Then, considering such elements as imagery, form, and tone, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the relationship between music and the speaker’s complex memories of her family.

Students were expected to accomplish three tasks successfully:

- They were to read carefully.
- They were to analyze the relationship between music and the speaker’s complex memories of her family.
- They were to write a well-organized essay on the topic.

The three tasks, of course, are interdependent; reading leads to analysis leads to writing leads to discovery leads to more development.

- Reading carefully means employing the techniques practiced during their Advanced Placement class and engaging with qualities, terms, and characteristics related to the study of poetry.
- Analysis means identifying the important parts of a larger whole and being able to explain how those parts connect to and function within that whole. In this case, students needed to identify the parts of the text that led to an understanding of the relationship between music and the speaker’s complex memories of family. The word “complex” here is a cue to the students that they might see complicated, shifting, paradoxical, or even opposing elements of those memories that were connected to the image of music. Students then had to articulate how those parts contribute to an overall “relationship.”
- Finally, writing a well-organized essay means understanding how their own thoughts about the text are connected, being able to support those assertions with clear, concrete examples, and cueing the reader with the appropriate compositional techniques, such as establishing a thesis and using transitional devices.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Overall, students were able to read and understand the poem. Most found it accessible and could connect their personal understandings of the effects of music on memories. Students were also able to use language appropriate to the study of poetry, demonstrating an understanding of line breaks, stanzas, narrative voice, figurative language and other elements. The responses indicate that students are being introduced to poetry and the basics of how to understand and explain it. Students also wrote a lot in response to this question. Readers noted that essays were generally longer than expected. The most successful essays asserted clear claims about the connection between music and the speaker’s complex memories and then supported those assertions with specific evidence from the poem—both in terms of content and technique. The overall mean score on this question, however, continued to be low, suggesting that many students struggle with writing clearly and confidently about poetry.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	Responses that Demonstrate Understanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students paraphrased or summarized the poem but did not analyze. (analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Furthermore, the image of the album cover represents major developments in both her personal life and black heritage as a whole; the cover is a symbol of pride or ‘art’ or even a watershed event in black heritage.” “Harper used music as a means of accessing the emotions of her lineage . . . Harper is able to compare the mundane—‘typing,’ ‘speakers’—to the musical, and therefore, to the personal.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students identified poetic features but were unable to connect them into a cohesive discussion. (analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Her initial supposition—‘if music can be passed on . . . this melody is my inheritance’—associates music with genetics through a metaphorical comparison. This serves to convey the inherent, almost ingrained importance of music to Harper’s family and primes the reader for Harper’s strong emotional connection to it.” “Equally relevant are the subtler references which weave together and solidify the auditory sensations of Harpers [<i>sic</i>] mixed home life and jazz music.”

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve student performance on the exam?

- Teachers could continue to help students to move beyond paraphrase in their reading of poetry. Too often, poetry reading becomes simply restating the content of the poem into classroom prose. Instead teachers should focus on “how” a poem says what it says. This would include a cohesive discussion of form (both structure and poetic elements) and how components of form contribute toward constructing a meaning.

One way to accomplish this would be to reverse how poetry is traditionally approached—instead of starting with meaning and working backwards to form and elements, teachers could experiment by “reading” a new, strange poem together with the class—how do we approach a work we don’t know? By examining form and elements together, the teacher could model with the class how to “work” with a poem rather than simply backing up from a received meaning. Teachers should begin by helping students through that initial reading and demonstrating how readers pay attention to particular features.

- Teachers could continue to help students to understand key ideas such as analysis and complexity when approaching all literature, but particularly poetry. Analysis means the identification of key parts and understanding how those parts contribute to a whole. Complexity means dealing with all features and allowing, even expecting, contradictory or paradoxical possibilities. This would help the students avoid oversimplifying or jumping to conclusions.

One way to do this would be to work through a single poem in two ways, and the Harper poem could be used for this purpose. The first time, teachers might help students to see the fondness that the speaker has for her family memories; how the images build feelings of security and closeness. The second time, teachers might help students to see the contradictory elements and structures, and explore how some images lead to feelings of insecurity and distance. Showing students contradictory readings of the same work—and helping students to see that both are present simultaneously and work together to contribute to our understanding of the text—can encourage productive discussions about how to handle complexities in poetry.

3. Teachers should be wary of only focusing on personal responses to poetry. Some students taking this year's examination simply approached the essay by remembering how music was important to their own families and their own memories. While such personal connections are important, they rarely lead to sound literary analysis. Poetry by its nature should be familiar and "de-familiar" at the same time, and teachers can help students access each of these qualities as a way of understanding the poem.

One way to accomplish this is simply to remove the "go to" question that begins many first encounters with poetry: "what is this poem saying?" or "what is this poem about?" Instead, we could begin with elements first—"what metaphors are used here?" "What images are part of this work?" "What is strange about this text?" Building from elements first may help students to see poetry as constructed discourse and not simply emotive language.

Question #2**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.05***What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?***

For Question 2, the prose question, students were asked to read an excerpt from *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* by Tobias Smollett and respond to the following prompt:

In the passage below, from *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) by Tobias Smollett, Mr. Pickle encounters Godfrey Gauntlet, the brother of his beloved Emilia. Consider how the two men confront their own uncontrolled emotions and yet attempt to abide by their social norms. In a well-developed essay, analyze how the author explores the complex interplay between emotions and social propriety in the passage. You may wish to consider such literary techniques as dialogue, narrative pace, and tone.

The students were expected to accomplish three tasks successfully:

- They were to consider a particular feature in the prose text.
- They were to analyze how the author explores the complex interplay between emotions and social propriety/social norms.
- They were to write a well-developed essay.

The three tasks, of course, are interdependent and are actually one unified task; consideration leads to analysis leads to writing.

- “Consider” means to focus on a particular feature of the text and to determine how it might lead to an understanding of the text. In this case, students were cued that there was a tension between the emotions of the two characters and the social codes within which each was attempting to act. Students did not have to know 18th-century social mores to answer this question; they simply had to understand that sometimes people feel one way but are constrained to behave in another. The prompt gave the students a contextual way of understanding what was being asked by equating “social norms” with “social propriety.”
- Analysis means identifying the important parts of a larger whole and being able to explain how those parts connect to and function within that whole. In this case, students needed to identify the authorial decisions that reveal the complex interplay between emotions and “social propriety” in the passage. The prompt did not ask students to analyze each character or even to identify specific social norms, but rather to focus on the interplay itself. The word “complex” here is a cue to the students that they might see complicated, shifting, paradoxical, or even opposing elements in the tension between emotions and social norms. In this case, students were asked to analyze how the author explores those complexities.
- Finally, writing a well-organized essay means understanding how their own thoughts are connected, being able to support those assertions with clear, concrete examples, and cueing the reader with the appropriate compositional techniques, such as establishing a thesis and using transitional devices.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

While some teachers and outside observers expressed concern about how students would handle this passage and this prompt, the Question Leader for this session observed, “The majority of students seemed to at least have a cursory understanding of the concept [of social propriety] or the ability to decode it in the prompt, that it meant ‘what we do’ or ‘what’s ‘normal.’ Readers commented throughout the reading that this was a challenging prompt and passage but that students were poised to at least try to negotiate it.”

Students did find the passage and the idea of emotions in conflict with social norms understandable, and they employed careful selection of detail to support assertions. Most students also saw the general humor of the passage—how quickly the emotions escalate during the conversation or the absurdity (from a modern viewpoint) of the characters’ assisting one another to take off their boots before the duel. A favorite observation, offered in a number of the more sophisticated essays, was that Emilia, the initial motivation for and subject of the conversation between Gauntlet and Pickle, completely disappears from the passage—that by the end, the two men don’t even recognize why they’re fighting. The more astute students were able to push their analysis further, seeing the passage as a critique of male power/quest for dominance or recognizing how class divisions, as presented in the passage, are flipped—in other words, offering a clear assertion about both how and why the author constructs the passage in this way. Many students were able to employ literary terms such as “irony” and “tone” correctly and use them to support their claims. The more successful responses identified the competing emotions and social structures that the characters were facing and at the same time revealed how the author led the reader to recognize these. While the final mean score for Question 2 represents a drop from previous years, it suggests that many students were able to access the language of the passage and negotiate the prompt.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students focused on plot—what happened—rather than how it happened and how it was presented by the author. (analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “This shows that, though he tries to maintain a stoic, proper exterior, Pickle cannot suppress his anger and frustration towards Gauntlet’s words, and he reveals his true feelings with an indignant look.” “The rapid pace at which their encounter proceeds is indicative of the high-tension emotions that fierily are on display during their conflict, which proceeds from a polite, respectful greeting, to action at the sword in a matter of lines. Thus, by highlighting the personal relationship between the two men . . . Smollett demonstrates the conflict that exists between the two men.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students identified features, but failed to identify complexity—that is, paradoxical or conflicting elements. (analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Ironically despite the two gentlemen bitterly despising each other, they choose to resolve their struggle through ‘a formal challenge’ (29). The formality of the duel shows what a large role social standards play in their lives, as instead of proceeding to blows, they opt for a formal, respectable conflict. Ironically again, even as they are preparing themselves for the fight, they ‘helped to pull off each <u>other</u>’s boots’ (32-33) . . . ” “As they speak, it is notable that Gauntlet and Pickle, for the vast majority of the conversation, refer to each other with deference and respect. They address each other as “sir”, even though neither one truly holds the other in high esteem. They question each other’s authority through politely passive aggression and formalities.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This encounter maxes on agression [<i>sic</i>] and violence, a sharp contrast from the polite and slightly tense banter of the dialogue in the introduction. However, despite their physical violence, they continued to make an attempt at an equal fight . . .”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students often simply ignored vocabulary or diction that may have been difficult for them to understand. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The usage of the mens’ vocabulary is also significant. For example, Pickle’s statement to Gauntlet that he is ‘. . . not at present disposed to appeal to [Gauntlet’s] opinion for the rectitude of [his] intentions’ (lines 9-11), demonstrates Pickle’s use of elevated diction and sophisticated vocabulary. . . . Smollett uses such dictions for his characters, to display the irony of their situation . . .”

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve student performance on the exam?

1. Teachers could help students navigate difficult passages organically. They might, for example, encourage students to identify their questions about the passage, let them be confused for a bit, give them space to misstep as they think through and learn about the passage. A passage like Smollett’s is rich, and simple questions like “Why is Gauntlet suddenly calm?” “Why do they take off each other’s boots?” or “Why is the word ‘sir’ repeated so many times?” can be fruitful. Sometimes it can be as simple as asking students, “What did you notice about this passage?” after an initial reading. Some simple “why?” and “how?” follow-up questions can facilitate thinking and analysis and open up the complexities of a passage like the one from *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*. From there, teachers could move to the more complex questions of how Smollett creates and controls the readers’ responses to the characters and situations.
2. In that direction, teachers could help students navigate difficult diction and syntax. Contextual meanings can help, but students need to move beyond simple definitions. Teachers could help students to understand that diction levels are often used both to reveal and conceal character. Using a passage like Smollett’s (or any number of others), teachers could show that **how** something is said and **why** it is being said that way are sometimes more important than **what** is actually being said.
3. Teachers could help students better understand overall complexity in characters and situations. Settling on a single identification of a character trait does not allow for paradoxical or conflicting elements. Complexity grows from multiple ideas, or from recognizing an idea which isn’t easily understood. Many students are so quick to answer definitively that they oversimplify the passage and miss the complexity (for example, some students claimed that Pickle is angry and has lost control, and Gauntlet is controlled and noble at the end). Many students think in dichotomies—either/or—and have to be helped to see that characters in literature are often multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory. Pickle is angry, but still in control; he is not respectful of Gauntlet the person but he is respectful of Gauntlet’s position. Gauntlet lacks full control at the beginning but is attempting to be dignified; he dislikes Pickle intensely for personal reasons, but is unwilling to treat him uncivilly. Situations are complex as well. Teachers could explore whether the duel has resolved the conflicts, whether social order has been maintained or damaged, whether Gauntlet or Pickle has actually won. Building responses that not only assemble evidence to support one side, but also deal with the contrary evidence, can challenge students to begin to navigate college level thinking.

Question #3

Max. Points: 9

Mean Score: 4.37

What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?

For Question 3, the “open” question, students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Select a novel, play, or epic poem that features a character whose origins are unusual or mysterious. Then write an essay in which you analyze how these origins shape the character and that character’s relationships, and how the origins contribute to the meaning of the work as a whole.

Students were expected to complete three tasks successfully:

- They were to select an appropriate work given the parameters of the prompt.
- They were to analyze how origins shape a character and that character’s relationships and how those origins contribute to the meaning of the work as a whole.
- They were to write an essay.

The three tasks are, of course, interdependent and are actually one unified task; selection leads to analysis leads to writing.

- Selection of a work for Question 3 has been the focus of much rumor and conjecture in the wider AP community. Contrary to popular belief, no choice of text automatically consigns a student to a particular score point or set of score points. Some texts, however, by their nature are self-limiting and, if chosen, create an added demand on the student’s ability to complete the task. Selection of appropriate works should be an outgrowth of a student’s ability to read, identify, and understand complexity within a text and not simply the result of a list or single rule.
- Analysis means identifying the important parts of a larger whole and being able to explain how those parts connect to and function within that whole. In this case, students were asked to analyze character by examining relevant aspects of a character’s origins. Students were given latitude on how they understood and explained what constituted unusual or mysterious origins. The emphasis was on how well they were able to identify how those origins contributed to the development of the character and that character’s relationships within the work. Finally, they were also asked to show how those elements contributed to “the meaning of the work as a whole.” That phrase, common in Question 3 prompts, points the students to making an assertion about a possible meaning and supporting that assertion with evidence. That completes the two-part analysis task. Again, students had latitude; some reached the meaning of the work as a whole implicitly by exploring the character and the character’s relationships. Others were more explicit in their statements.
- Finally, writing a well-organized essay means understanding how their own thoughts are connected, being able to support those assertions with clear, concrete examples, and cueing the reader with the appropriate compositional techniques, such as establishing a thesis and using transitional devices.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Overall, students responded quite well to this question. Most students understood the task, chose an appropriate work, and identified a literary character with unusual or mysterious origins. Many equated “origin” with a character’s background, an understandable move. The terms “unusual” and “mysterious” offered students multiple avenues to building interpretations.

As usual with Question 3, students had varying degrees of success when attempting to discuss the meaning of the work as a whole within the parameters of the prompt. Nonetheless, many students seemed prepared to discuss larger thematic concerns in texts, and some did so quite well. Students in the upper half of the scoring rubric produced sophisticated, imaginative, well-focused, and well-supported interpretations of complex texts, carefully connecting the bits of evidence to support larger assertions about both the characters and the work as a whole.

The best essays demonstrated the ability of student writers to dive into the depths of meaning in multi-layered texts, such as *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Brave New World*, for example. Upper-half essays not infrequently identified aspects of the structure of a work that related in salient ways to the development of character and thus to the prompt, particularly in discussing frame structure in *Frankenstein*, *Ethan Frome*, *Wuthering Heights*, or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Successful essays revealed a greater level of attention to detail. In these ways, students found the question to serve as a forgiving, yet focused, prompt, creating a platform from which they could demonstrate their particular strengths, interests, and engagement with texts. As in the past, this question had the highest mean score of the three free response questions, indicating that students overall continued to be more comfortable responding to Question 3 than to Question 1 or Question 2.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students paraphrased or summarized plot points but failed to use those in analysis. (analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Because of <i>Beloved</i>’s unusual origins, she has trouble formulating a meaningful self-identity, the family is polarized because of her unexpected arrival, and the novel as a whole is able to better communicate the message that humans have a distinct and deep ability to adapt to new environments.” “John killed himself because he himself had broken under the pressure of society despite his strong resolve perhaps indicating that no one is immune to the ravages of societal expectation and normality.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students speculated or offered “counter-factual” statements in place of analysis. (analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Although, as previously stated, the Monster’s origin had a great influence on his course of action, he still made the choice to become educated, to murder the Frankensteins, and to cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war to end Victor’s happiness in revenge.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In the end, Worthing comes to terms with the circumstances of his origination. Found in a handbag, Worthing was most likely an illegitimate child whose upper-class parents sought to abandon in an attempt to cover-up their scandalous connection. Although Wilde does not explicitly say that this is the case, it is implied . . . Overall, Jack (Ernest) Worthing’s entire existence, from birth to the culmination of Oscar Wilde’s play, is a satirical accentuation and concurrent deridding [<i>sic</i>] of superficial, hypocritical Victorian society.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students struggled to construct a well-written essay either by making generalized assertions that were unsupported or by failing to connect observations into a clear, cohesive discussion. (writing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the construction of sample 3A. It contains a clear thesis which asserts a response to the full prompt and supports that thesis with clear, specific examples from the text. The argument is thoughtfully organized and presented using clear cues to the reader that connect paragraphs to the thesis and ideas to each other.

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve student performance on the exam?

1. Teachers could continue to help students to understand how observations about character (and setting and even points of plot) fit into larger meanings of the work as a whole. However, teachers should be cautious about arriving at a single meaning, theme or universal idea that oversimplifies that meaning. Works of literature are complex and often contain paradoxical or conflicting elements. Teachers could help students to understand that whole works of literature cannot be easily summarized into an oversimplified resolution, and that analyses of character (or setting or plot points) can only be used to build a meaning, not “the” meaning.
2. Teachers could continue to help students free themselves from the organization of plot. Students are too often bound by linear development of the texts that they are reading, and too often, essay responses in Question 3 become summaries because students attempt to write commentary rather than engage in organized analysis. Teachers might, for example, juxtapose passages from the beginning and end of a novel to help students see how choosing and controlling when to talk about points can build a stronger essay. Teachers might get students to rank features of a character from strongest to weakest and then to assemble passages from throughout the work that support that ranking.
3. Finally, teachers could continue to help students understand how development contributes to strengthen both organization and support. By creating assignments and responses where students must come up with multiple examples, and by helping them understand how to organize those examples effectively for the reader, teachers will help students move away from the idea that a single bit of evidence proves a point.