

## Ready for the AP Exam in the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade?

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For too long, many people have seen college as a goal in itself. Just getting there is enough, they think. The truth is that we must help our high school students do more than matriculate. We must help them develop skills to ensure their success in college classrooms. Those who do not plan to go to college need to develop skills to make them more productive and more fulfilled. The sooner they start to develop these skills, the better. The more fully developed these skills become, the more prepared our students will be for whatever challenges lie before them.

I routinely look to the AP English Literature and Language Exams as a sort of guide for what skills I should emphasize in my eighth grade classroom. Though my students know that the AP class is a possibility for them in the distant future, I definitely do not expect them to start worrying about it now. Many of my students will not even take the AP Exam, and I certainly will not be asking them to take practice exams in the eighth grade. However, the skills students need to be successful on the AP English Language or Literature Exam are the same skills that will prepare them for all kinds of other challenges, so I find that it is a very good place to start.

Question 2 of the 2001 AP English Literature Exam asks students to read a passage from *Tom Jones* and “analyze the techniques Fielding employs...to characterize Mr. Allworthy and Mrs. Deborah Wilkins.” To do well on this question, students must be close readers, able to analyze an author’s use of imagery, detail, and diction. Students must be familiar with comparing and contrasting. They must have very good writing skills and be able to use evidence to present a solid argument. That evidence must be correctly referenced and attributed to the original text, and students who are unfamiliar with anything but contemporary fiction will have difficulty just reading this particular text.

Shouldn’t we be asking our middle school students to practice close reading, analyzing a piece of fiction for such elements as imagery, detail, and diction? On my own Vertical Team, the writing focus for eighth graders is on argumentation, how to use evidence to present a solid case, so this AP Exam question is not so far removed from what I would want to bring to my eighth grade classroom. I could ask my students to perform similar tasks with easier pieces of fiction, or I could create easier tasks to help them decipher the more difficult texts.

It is probably not surprising to find that another question from the same literature exam (question 1, 2001) requires many of the same skills from students. This question asks them to read two poems, one from Wordsworth and one from Dunbar. Students must “compare and contrast the two poems and analyze the relationship between them.” All of the same skills are being tested here—the ability to close read, compare/contrast, and find evidence. Again, students who have not read literature—especially poetry—from other time periods will be at a disadvantage.

Looking at these two questions together reminds me that I should expose my students to more passages and poems from other time periods, to texts that will be difficult for them to read and understand. I wouldn’t ask them to read the entire novel, necessarily, but I wouldn’t mind devoting an entire class period to a passage from *Pride and Prejudice* or a bit of an Eliot poem. We might do no more than understand what happens in each passage, but that would be enough. As they experience success with texts they deem “impossible,” they will grow more confident and more willing to take on other challenges.

What might surprise some teachers is that a similar study of the AP English Language Exam questions yields a similar result. Question 2 of the 2000 exam, the Gandhi/Orwell question, asks students to “note [the author’s] choice of details and his tone.” This passage proved to be extremely difficult; some students had difficulty simply keeping Orwell’s and Gandhi’s arguments separate. But the prompt also asks them to “assess how effectively Orwell develops his own position.” Again, students must be able to compare and contrast as well as to make sense of a difficult text. The only difference here is the fact that students have to assess another’s argument even as they are making their own.

Question 3 of the 2001 AP English Language Exam uses the words “support, refute, or qualify,” but the task for students is essentially the same. They must make sense of a difficult text, analyze the argument, then gather evidence to defend their own arguments. They must write “well-focused, persuasive essays,” making “apt and specific references to the passage,” and display “effective control of language.”

So these AP Exam questions seem to ask many of the same things of students. They must close read and analyze passages—whether fiction or nonfiction, poetry or prose. They must analyze arguments and form their own. They must write well-focused essays with references to the text. Which of these skills would we not expect of an eighth grader?

No matter what classes or tests they do take in the four years after they leave my classroom, the skills students must master in order to do well on the AP English Language and Literature Exams are skills that will serve them well in many other challenging courses, not just in an AP class. More importantly, these same skills will help them to become more engaged members of their communities. A person who was able to assess the effectiveness of an argument in high school is a person who is better prepared to, say, sort through editorials in the newspaper, analyze the arguments presented there, and make an informed decision.

The skills our students need for these exams will help them to do well in any challenging course. These skills should not be confined only to those who will eventually take an AP class; rather, we want all of our students to know these skills, and we can start teaching them in middle school or earlier. We want all of our students to acquire these skills even if they do not plan to go to college. These skills will help them to do well and stay in college if they do go. Students who have—over the course of their K–12 careers—developed the skills listed above will be more confident and better able to accomplish any tasks set before them.

### Activity

Choose any free-response question from a past AP English Literature or Language Exam (these can be found for free in the Exam Questions section on the College Board Web site, AP Central, [apcentral.collegeboard.com](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com)) and rewrite it for middle school students. You might choose a difficult passage and ask students to do a simpler task, or you could choose a question with simple reading and ask students to do a more complicated bit of analysis with it.

### Examples

Use the Orwell/Gandhi question (question 2 of the 2000 AP English Language and Composition Exam) and ask students to do no more than explain the two separate arguments, Orwell's and Gandhi's.

In a difficult literary passage, ask students to act out the scene.

Use the short story “Eleven” from the novel *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros. This story was excerpted on the 1995 AP English Literature and Composition Exam. Ask students to discuss how the author's choice of imagery contributes to a characterization of Rachel.

Ask students to read the Audubon/Dillard passages from question 3 of the 2003 AP English Language Exam and highlight the details each author chooses to describe the flocks of birds.