



Student Performance Q&A:

2003 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Gale Larson of California State University in Northridge, California. 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 performance 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

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully two poems concerned with Eros, the Greek god of love, the first by Robert Bridges and the second by Anne Stevenson. They were then asked to write an essay in which they were to compare and contrast the two concepts of Eros and analyze the techniques used to create them. The purpose of this question was to test students' analytical and interpretive skills by presenting them with two challenging poems. To answer the question successfully, students had to understand the language and techniques of poetry and, through this understanding, to arrive at an analytical interpretation of the essential meanings of both poems — a task that required a high level of critical thinking. The question was truly challenging and served as a good discriminator of the students' ability to read and comprehend two rather sophisticated poems.

How well did students perform on this question?

Fewer students received scores of 9 and 8 for their performance on the poetry question than on the other two questions. While the question was sufficiently open to elicit a variety of responses from students, many failed to demonstrate anything more than a superficial understanding of the poems. The Bridges poem was inaccessible to many students because of the complexity of its ambiguity and ironic tone. Some students did not understand the meaning of "bully boy" in the Stevenson poem. They failed to detect the playful tone it implies and instead interpreted it as a dark, negative image, which led to a misreading of the poem.

Some comparisons and contrasts between the two poems were not only too literal but were also filled with shallow misreadings. For some students, Bridges's Eros was faceless and Stevenson's Eros was merely ugly, a difference that was not only simplistic but also wrong. Most readers believed that, given the difficulty of the poems themselves and the constraint of time, many of the students were not able to grasp the complexities of each poem and to compose an effective comparative analysis that truly highlighted the similarities and differences. More often than not, students discussed poetic techniques,

such as rhyme scheme, alliteration, and imagery, without connecting them to meaning. For them, the poems were all sound without sense, form without meaning.

The mean score for this question was 4.64 out of a possible nine points, slightly higher than the 4.40 mean score on last year's poetry question on Thomas Hardy's poem about the *Titanic*, "The Convergence of the Twain."

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most prevalent criticism readers offered was that the students' responses demonstrated an unfamiliarity with close reading of poetic texts. Students, in other words, were not equipped to compose effective responses by dealing effectively with the elements of poetry. Nor were they able to link their analyses of these elements to significant ideas that revealed a sophisticated understanding of each poem.

- Far too many of the students appeared to think that any literary language prior to that of their own day is "Old English" or "Shakespearean," so poor Robert Bridges, a poet laureate of the twentieth century, was repeatedly said to be writing in Old English.
- Students were confused about the poets' use of techniques. They knew something was going on but really did not know how to articulate it.
- Students failed to supply adequate textual support for their generalizations.
- Students wrote verbose, meaningless introductions, failed to consider the entire poem, confused the poet with the speaker, and wrote ineffectual conclusions.
- Far too many students failed to address the "concepts" of Eros as specified in the prompt or skipped over the techniques that created those concepts.
- Students missed the complexity of Eros in Bridges's poem and thus oversimplified the negative/positive contrasts between the two poems.
- Students sometimes wrote about rhyme scheme and rhythm without regard to tone and meaning. Rhyme and structure were often not connected to the concept of Eros.
- Many students compared the poems but not the concepts. One reader wrote, "Answer the question!!"
- Some students read the dates (1899 and 1990) and assumed the poems were representative of the "society" at that time.
- Some students knew the literary terms and could find examples in the poems, but they failed to explain how the poems and the devices contributed to meaning.
- Some students concentrated on the visual image of Eros and failed to focus on the techniques that shaped the concepts of Eros.
- Few students were able to speak to the ambiguity or the irony inherent in each poem.

All of these observations suggest that students need to spend more class time engaged in reading and analyzing poetry so that they become more skilled not only in understanding the language of poetry but in connecting language to theme or meaning.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

The one thing I would stress is the need to spend more time reading and analyzing poetry. Yes, students need to be introduced to the elements of poetry, but not in isolation. Knowledge of poetic devices is only helpful when it is put to the service of unpacking meaning. Do not teach scansion, for example, as an end in itself. Scansion should be connected to meaning, the primary focus of any poetic analysis. In Blake's "London," for example, teachers can use scansion to demonstrate how sound and rhythm contribute to meaning. The line "Mind forged manacles" abruptly changes the meter in order to emphasize its theme.

Listed below are a few pragmatic suggestions for AP teachers:

- Have students respond to similar questions with similar time constraints on equally demanding poems.
- Teach students to recognize literary techniques and to be able to explain how techniques are related to meaning. Stress the effect techniques produce, not just the identification of them.
- Teach close reading of poetic texts.
- Model the recursive, integrative method of literary analysis (especially comparison/contrast).
- Teach students to come to a literal understanding of the poem first and then to decide on its overall theme or meaning.
- Have students discuss how imagery, metaphor, and other figurative language contribute to the meaning of the poem.
- Encourage more reading for pleasure to increase knowledge of context.
- Help students recognize the complexity of poems by emphasizing the connection between structural and thematic shifts.
- Help students become more comfortable with ambiguity and irony.
- Help students become more fluent in the vocabulary of literary analysis.
- Remind students to read the prompt carefully and to answer the question fully.
- Give students some instruction in mythology.

AP teachers in general are doing a good job and these suggestions will provide further support for their work. Professor Warren Carson, question leader of the poetry question, reminds us all that "Our job as English teachers remains what it has always been: to challenge our students to read widely and to think deeply and to help them learn to articulate their thinking — not to have them memorize catch phrases

from critics and others to sprinkle throughout their essays. We serve students, of course. We realize, too, that for many AP readers, student scores will be reported in their local papers. Yet we must continue to be faithful to the investment in the experience of ideas that has brought us together in the first place, our ‘Eros’ for the written word.”

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read an excerpt from Mavis Gallant’s short story “The Other Paris” and then to write an essay in which they were to explain how the author uses narrative voice and characterization to provide social commentary. The purpose of the question was to test the students’ close reading and broader interpretive skills. The question was direct and extremely accessible to most students. They definitely had something to say about the passage.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.83 out of a possible nine points. Based on anecdotal evidence I gathered from the readers, I would say students did well in answering this question. Last year they were asked to read a passage from Alain de Botton’s *Kiss and Tell*, a passage that also employed humor, so I think many of them were prepared to deal with the humor of this passage and did so more successfully than last year’s students. This year’s students, however, also had their problems. These were basically twofold: a lack of familiarity with the term “narrative voice” and an inability to focus on “social commentary.” Students could deal with characterization, they could perceive the humor of the piece, and they recognized its irony. What many could not do was to tie these aspects together to give an articulate response that identified the author’s subtle and sophisticated use of characterization and narrative voice to condemn the shallow and inept attitudes of Carol and Howard about love and marriage in general.

Some readers believed the passage was too accessible and asked for a reprieve, at least in the immediate future, from passages that ask students to recognize and analyze the humor of an excerpt. As one reader put it, “I hope we see a return on the exam to other types of prose passages. We’ve had conversational humor in contemporary fiction for two years in a row.” I recognize that even this response was uttered in good humor, since we all know that literary devices like humor and irony are often subtleties that form a sophisticated subtext in a well-crafted work of dramatic or nondramatic literature.

Many readers claimed that “narrative voice” was a term not commonly used and that as a result many students mistakenly equated it with simple point of view. Many suggested that “narrator’s attitude” or “tone” are more familiar to students. One reader asked that the use of terminology in a prompt be discussed on AP Central™ (apcentral.collegeboard.com) since she believes that mastery of terminology should be a means to “level the playing field,” and one way to achieve that is the use of more commonly used terms. I personally believe that “narrative voice” should be part of students’ active literary vocabulary if for no other reason than to give them a strategy of distinguishing between it and point of view so that a higher level of critical thinking can shape their analysis of any given passage of literature. The same criticism was leveled against the use of the term “social commentary.” A student’s failure to make the connection between “narrative voice” and a resulting “social commentary” should not be blamed on terminology. Teach Bernard Shaw’s plays and students will soon come to recognize the nuances and subtleties of how social commentary unfolds through multiple dramatic devices.

Many students, observed Professor James Barcus, question leader of the prose passage, rose to the challenge of the prompt and were capable of demonstrating an awareness of the importance of examining prevailing values and of questioning societal assumptions. This year's data suggest that students did indeed perform about as well as last year's group. Students, by and large, performed better on this question than on the other two; that is, there were fewer low scores and more high scores on this question than on the other two.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Year after year, I hear from readers that students fail to read the questions carefully and often neglect to answer all parts of the question. This year's prose question was no exception.

- Far too many students failed to remember the names of the characters in the excerpt.
- Some students assumed the piece was a commentary on Parisian society.
- Students were often bewildered or puzzled over the term "narrative voice." They confused it with point of view, and many of them wrote endlessly about third person omniscient narrators in a very mechanical way. Some readers believed the term should have been glossed so as to avoid such confusion.
- Too many students failed to recognize the irony or satire of the piece. As a result they failed to see the significance of the "social commentary."
- Students kept referring to the author, Mavis Gallant, as "he." One reader told me that in the upper half papers in which the passage's irony was detected, those who clearly identified Gallant as a "he" perceived the irony as "bitter," "biting," "harshly mocking," while those who knew Mavis to be a woman's name saw the irony as more "gentle" and observed the element of "pity" in the passage. Readers requested the Development Committee identify the sex of the author in the prompt itself whenever possible.
- The recurring criticism of many of the readers was that students relied too much on paraphrase and summary without tying them to analysis. As many teachers know, getting students to recognize the difference between summarizing and analyzing is not an easy task.
- Students failed to make consistent, apt, skillfully integrated references to the text itself.
- Some students had no rudiments of structure (i.e., no paragraphs, no topic sentences). Readers found such absences irritating.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

One thing I would stress is the need for students to be engaged in a close reading of texts. Teachers should see to it that their students develop the skill of supporting their analysis with apt references to that text. Other activities teachers can do to improve their students' performances on the exam include the following:

- Teach students to break down the prompt and answer each part. A suggestion that many readers uttered frequently can be captured thus: know what the prompt requires and fulfill it. In other words, “Answer the prompt, the whole prompt, and nothing but the prompt.” Do more, however, than just restate the prompt endlessly.
- Require more critical reading exercises of students. Have them write practice essays and timed essays, and give them more feedback on their writing.
- Advise students to stay on task. This question unfortunately encouraged many students to produce their own views of love and marriage instead of analyzing what was going on in the passage itself.
- Help students keep in mind that it is not enough to identify literary conventions; they must also be able to demonstrate how their use advances a greater purpose, such as “social commentary.”
- Help students to see the ambiguities in writing and to go beyond superficial readings. More and more students are capable of recognizing literary elements, but they need to go the next distance, that is, seeing how they are used in a given passage, seeing how they connect with meaning.
- Hold students accountable for reading a wide range of challenging works and for writing about them from various perspectives. This is often difficult these days when students are pushed into taking the exam with insufficient preparatory background.
- Do not ignore the craft of an essay and simply reward for content. Teachers should teach their students the value of good writing and let them see samples of it.

I would also like to add that I think teachers should attend AP workshops whenever possible, certainly before they teach an AP course. They should become familiar with AP Central, with vertical teaming, and with the requirements of the exam and the way it is scored. Assigning students a practice question, one that is timed, and then providing a scoring guide or rubric for them to score those essays can be a means of demystifying the exam while giving them valuable experiences of developing critical reading and writing skills.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Question 3, the “open” question, asked students to read a passage by Northrop Frye about tragic heroes as inevitable conductors as well as victims of the divine lightning. Students were then told to select a novel or play in which a tragic figure functions as an instrument of the suffering of others and to explain how the suffering the hero brings upon others contributes to the tragic vision of the work as a whole. Some readers believed that this year’s open question was not as complex on morally ambiguous characters as last year’s question. They felt the prompt was more direct, more specific, in what it asked students to do. Students seemed to recognize that the Northrop Frye quotation was meant to engage them in the larger consideration of a literary theme and then have them apply the theme to a particular work. This is the one section of the exam for which students should be somewhat more prepared. They have studied many works of literature and in the process should have become quite familiar with a choice few that they are prepared to write on, provided that the works they are especially acquainted with do indeed fit the question asked.

How well did students perform on this question?

Data suggest this year's open question was the most difficult of the three questions for students and perhaps the best discriminator of their performance. The mean score for this question was 4.43 out of a possible nine points this year as opposed to 4.68 last year. Twenty-eight percent of the students received scores of 3 and below on the nine-point scale, compared with 22.0 percent and 19.4 percent on Questions one and two, respectively. While many readers believed students performed better on this year's question than last year's, the data seem to indicate otherwise.

While the question was perhaps more direct, more specific, than last year's question, it does not follow that students found the question easy. The most recurring criticism from the readers was the same as that of last year. Students failed to address all aspects of the prompt. They either failed to read the question carefully, as instructed, or they were just incapable of addressing the last part of the prompt, the explanation of how the suffering brought on others by the tragic hero contributes to the tragic vision of the work as a whole. Students were well prepared to discuss how the tragic hero contributed to the suffering of others, often providing a laundry list of those who suffered and a description of the nature of that suffering. They were not as well prepared to show how that suffering contributes to the tragic vision of the work as a whole. To address that portion of the prompt demanded a higher level of sophisticated critical thinking. Because of this failure to address adequately the issue of tragic vision, readers had to be particularly astute to detect whether or not students addressed this part of the prompt by implication. More so this year than in previous years, readers pointed out that what often contributed to mid- and lower-range scores was that many students did not go beyond plot summary and that they often merely listed the sufferers without further comment.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many readers commented that the range of works selected by students this year was narrower than in previous years. The question itself, of course, contributed to that limitation. Popular choices of dramatic works included *Oedipus*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Death of a Salesman*. The more popular novels included *Things Fall Apart*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Frankenstein*, and *Beloved*.

- One of the common errors students made in their selection of a text to answer this question was their demonstration that they were not that familiar with the chosen text. Students should be advised to select a work they know well, and that means knowing the names of the characters. Willy Loman and his sons Biff and Happy were called a variety of names. Readers are rather disconcerted when they see such a consistent lack of precision on the part of students.
- Almost as off-putting as the failure to remember names in a work of their choice is the misspelling of key words that appear in the prompt (for example, students consistently misspelled the word "tragedy").
- Students should prepare for the open question with a wider reading and understanding of texts so that they do not fall into the error of forcing the text to conform to the ramifications of the question. Many students selected works that had nontragic figures or figures that merely caused harm to others, or they selected works that did not work particularly well, such as Albert Camus's *The Stranger*.
- Students had difficulty focusing on the concept of "tragic vision" as reflected in the work as a whole. As mentioned earlier, students either ignored it or forgot about it as part of the question, but far too often they seemed to substitute mere paraphrase of the plot without making connections to the larger issue of "tragic vision." There is no doubt this question was a

challenging one, and asking students to comment on the overall tragic vision of the work demanded that they understand the relationships between the parts to forge a comprehensive answer to a very philosophical quandary. The abler students rose to that occasion.

- A few readers pointed out that many students write out the entire prompt before they start answering the question. This is not only a waste of time on the part of students and scorers, but it suggests that students may be padding their essays. Teaching students how to write effective introductions could preclude this ineffective habit. One reader put it very succinctly: “Too much summary, little analysis, failure to draw conclusions.”

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Over the years, I have ruminated about this particular question, and I have come to the conclusion that it is too one-sided. Yes, teachers are indeed interested in knowing what it takes to improve the performance of their students on AP Exams; however, they are also very aware that much depends on the students themselves. Maybe the question should be rewritten to say, “What can students do to improve their performances?” As many of us know, there are far too many students sitting for AP Exams who have not been prepared for such challenging questions. In recent years there are more blanks or mere restatements of the prompts than ever before. Often these situations are the result of political decisions completely removed from the classroom AP teachers.

In spite of what I have said above, I would like to suggest a few strategies teachers can engage in that will at least put them on the right track toward improving their students’ performances on the exam.

- Let your students know that AP readers are familiar with the literary works they choose. Students do not need to engage in an overuse of summaries of the action of a given work. The skill that is being tested by these questions is the students’ ability to understand a work by means of analysis. Students need to know the difference between paraphrase and analysis. Summary or paraphrase should only be used in the service of analysis. Students need to deal with ideas, with meaning, with content, and they need to be taught how to connect the devices or elements of literature to those larger issues. They need constant preparation in close critical reading in order to develop their powers of critical thinking. One beginning point is to emphasize the need for explanation of examples as a way to move students from mere plot summary.
- I know many teachers use former exam questions as a means of preparation for the exam itself. When this is done, I suggest teachers spend time, a great deal of time, analyzing the prompt itself. Stress over and over to students the absolute necessity of understanding all parts of the question and, equally important, the need to answer all parts of the question. Insist that they stay on task and discourage personal tangents that do not advance the interpretation of the work.
- “To teach close reading,” says Professor Mary Kay Harrington, question leader of the open question, “is a challenge for all teachers in a culture where overstimulated students seldom carve out time necessary for careful reading and thinking. Encouraging and teaching close reading is the responsibility of faculty in all disciplines, in K–12 and in higher education. We can’t discuss writing and thinking without discussing reading. For too long they’ve been isolated from one another. The huge role of pop culture, the media, and government spins make it even more crucial that students be prepared to read carefully and ask critical questions of every text from *Othello* to *USA Today*.”

In her reports before the entire group of readers this year, Professor Harrington offered some important strategies for critical reading. I believe they will be helpful to all students.

1. Write questions, comments, and characters' names in the text or on a separate card or paper.
2. Avoid merely underlining (a passive act).
3. Hold onto the story line.
4. Ask who is telling the story and what that person's point of view might be.
5. Ask what the central tension or conflict is.
6. Hold onto the details and moments that seem especially significant.
7. Anticipate the direction of the story/plot.
8. Ask what the "big ideas" are.
9. Ask what a scene or detail seems to mean.
10. Relate and connect prior knowledge and experience to the ideas and the plot.
11. Ask if a scene or detail matters.
12. Be patient.
13. Reread.

Note: I want to thank all of the readers who participated in this year's scoring of the AP English Literature and Composition Exam. I recognize what a dedicated group you are and that without that dedication and expertise the job would never go as smoothly as it has. I look forward to working with you all again next year. I encourage those of you who have not scored AP Exams to get involved either through AP Central, AP workshops, AP conventions, or as a reader of the AP Exams.