



Student Performance Q&A:
2006 AP[®] English Literature and Composition
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2006 free-response questions for AP[®] English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, James E. Barcus of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. 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 a poem, Robert Penn Warren's "Evening Hawk," and then to write a well-organized essay in which they identified the speaker's attitude toward the hawk and the natural world. In this essay, they were expected to analyze how the poet uses language to convey mood and meaning. The intent of this question was to assess students' abilities to read closely, paying attention to the resources of language used to convey the attitude of the speaker. To respond to the question successfully, students needed to have a firm grasp of the devices and techniques employed by poets and then to arrive at an analytical and defensible reading of the poem. Because this poem is allusive, rich, and challenging, most students were able to respond to it on some level, and the able students had many opportunities to demonstrate their skills.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for responses to this prompt was 4.27 out of a possible 9 points, slightly below the mean score of 4.67 in 2005, and the lowest mean of the three 2006 prompts. However, the prompt discriminated very well. That is, the ablest essays were nuanced and intelligent and contained analyses of the metaphorical and philosophical trajectories in the poem, whereas the less able managed to speak to the issues with various levels of precision. The question was sufficiently open to support a variety of responses from students, providing interesting reading experiences for the Readers.

Many students performed quite well, writing thoughtful essays on this difficult poem. Because the question was broadly cast, the most able students realized that they did not need to declare what the poem means in its entirety, but they could claim for themselves an analytical space and discuss how the poet uses language to convey meanings of a part, various parts, or the whole poem. Many students commented meaningfully on how Warren uses descriptive language to establish the setting and how figurative language is employed to convey the power and might of the hawk in flight at the close of day. In addition, many students discussed the poet's use of both literal and figurative language to establish the moods of the poem and how the mood moves from awesome wonderment to something darker and more ominous.

The best student readers, thinkers, and writers found the text profoundly rich and complex and produced well-organized essays that explored the relationships between language and thought in precise ways. Nevertheless, the lower-than-usual mean score suggests that teachers ought to provide additional experience in close reading (explication of the text). Many students were unable to move beyond noting that the poet employs metaphors or some other device and failed to make the connection between the vehicle and the thought.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Again this year, Readers were troubled by the number of students who appear to be untutored in close reading of poetic texts. Many students were not equipped to compose effective responses that employed an analysis of poetic techniques, especially since the prompt intentionally did not provide a possible laundry list of such devices. Too many students who could identify a metaphor or alliteration were unable to turn a list of techniques into an essay that showed how the devices contributed to the meaning of the poem. Readers noted the following problems:

- Students struggled with the simplest vocabulary words.
- Students failed to support their generalizations with specific references to the texts.
- Students emphasized a mechanical essay form, providing meaningless introductions and repetitious conclusions.
- Students have memorized lists of devices, sometimes even esoteric and sophisticated terms, but they were unable to integrate the lists into intelligent commentary.
- Students substituted summary or paraphrase for analysis.
- Students were unable to show how a technique they could identify (or sometimes misidentify) contributed to the meaning of the poem.
- Students were unable to discuss the rich ambiguity of the poem. Too many insisted on pursuing a Blakean "single vision" rather than analyzing the complexity of the language.
- Students sometimes failed to distinguish between literal and figurative uses of language.
- Many students were unable to construct an essay with a controlling idea.

These observations suggest that teachers must spend more class time engaged in reading, discussing, and analyzing poetry so that students become more skilled not only in understanding the mechanics of poetic language but in connecting language to 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?

Teachers should spend more time reading and analyzing poetic lines in context. Although students need to be introduced to the elements of poetic language, such as hyperbole, simile, and metaphor, these devices must be taught as techniques that contribute to meaning, not as discrete entities to be compiled like a shopping list. Students often assert, for example, that the poet uses diction and then assemble a series of disconnected words, providing no analysis of how the choice of words affects tone or contributes to meaning. Or they assert that the poet employs a rhythmic pattern, but they are unable to analyze what this meter contributes to meaning or, more important, how the deviations from the basic pattern affect meaning. To improve their students' performance on the poetry question, AP English Literature teachers should consider these suggestions:

- Give students practice with close reading of poetic texts, beginning with basic issues of vocabulary and referring to a good dictionary frequently. For example, analyze the word *fine* in lines such as "The grave's a fine and private place, but none, I think, do there embrace" from Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," having students discuss the possible meanings of the word in this context.
- Develop comparable prompts and require students to write in-class essays with similar time constraints. Then ask the students to score the essays, using scoring guidelines similar to those employed at the AP Reading.
- Hone writing skills by writing with the students and allowing the essays to be scored anonymously by the class.
- Teach students not just to recognize literary techniques but to explain how those techniques contribute to meaning.
- Emphasize that an essay should integrate ideas into a coherent whole rather than produce discrete and isolated analyses.
- Encourage students to read poetic texts for their own personal pleasure, documenting that pleasure with a journal.
- Develop poetry units that move from simple and accessible texts to complex and challenging poems such as Warren's "Evening Hawk."
- Teach texts from all literary periods, from the medieval to the contemporary, and demonstrate that although conventions may differ, certain techniques and genres are commonly employed.
- Remind students to read the prompt carefully and to answer the question fully.
- Teach students to integrate and embed their textual evidence into sentences and paragraphs and to avoid simplistic and bald assertions.
- Emphasize that mature thinking and writing recognizes and explores the ambiguities and ironies that plague human existence. The concept of irony continues to elude students.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully an excerpt from *Lady Windermere's Fan*, a play by Oscar Wilde, produced in 1892. Then, in a well-organized essay they were to analyze how the playwright reveals the values of the characters and the nature of their society. Although the prompt deviated

from recent practice in that it came from a play, nevertheless the materials were present for students to delineate character, interpret situation, apply analytical skills to representative nineteenth-century literary language, and link their close-reading skills to a discovery of theme.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed somewhat better on this year's longer passage than on the 2005 less rich short story, Katharine Brush's "Birthday Party." The mean score of 4.59 out of a possible 9 points was the highest of this year's three free-reponse questions and significantly better than the 4.32 mean score of 2005. Students wrote longer essays, and the themes they proposed were more varied. The evocative satirical language allowed them to access their previous experience, reading, interpreting, and writing about comedy and drama to good advantage.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common student errors or omissions on this question are similar to those on the poetry question and reflect the trend in American society to read less and to write in some shorthand form of text messaging. This trend, documented in such national studies as "Reading at Risk,"* portends a future generation unable to engage in literate, deliberate analysis and must be addressed if our democratic institutions are to survive. AP teachers must resist these trends and emphasize to students that brief assertions cannot substitute for in-depth and intelligent analysis. Among the problems Readers noted are these:

- The paucity of vocabulary skills hindered students' ability to write cogently and think analytically. For example, very few students showed that they knew the definition of the word *intelligible*. Most confused *intelligible* and *intelligent*.
- Although students were able to analyze character, they had a difficult task with "the characters' values and the nature of their society." However they defined society, they frequently resorted to a stereotypical, oversimplified view of life in 1892.
- The cultural context baffled many students, for they displayed no real understanding of such titles as *duchess*, *lord*, or *lady*. In short, they demonstrated little knowledge of a historical context not much removed, either historically or geographically, from their own.
- Students often failed to support their assertions with apt, skillfully integrated references to the text itself.
- Many students struggled with the concept of the essay as a coherent whole. They relied on a mechanical organizational pattern producing five disconnected paragraphs, apparently unaware that an essay ought to build an argument with each point depending on the previous paragraph.
- Students had difficulty showing the connection between a character's tone and diction and the character's values or those of society.

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?

In a society and educational environment that seldom supports the skills central to the AP experience, teachers might profitably turn to drama as a way to encourage students to become

* "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America," Research Div. Report No. 46 (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004).

active learners and readers. The riches of the theater have much to do with the dramatic possibilities inherent at a particular moment in a play. Who is on stage? What tensions exist among the characters? What unstated things might the characters be thinking? Teachers should consider using drama as a tool for teaching *what if?* Many students clearly had trouble staging this scene in their heads.

- Students need a vocabulary to discuss drama, not just the vocabulary of poetry and prose analysis. Dramatic analysis and interpretation appeared to be unknown concepts to many students. This prompt revealed that, perhaps with the exception of Shakespeare, teachers spend little time analyzing drama.
- Students must be taught the difference between paraphrase or summary and analysis and how to turn their observations into an argument.
- Many students lacked the necessary vocabulary to perform dramatic analysis.
- In addition to discipline-specific vocabulary skills, students must be familiar with the word bank common to educated readers.
- Remind students that prompts used in previous years do not predict the content of future exams. Humor, satire, and irony may or may not be integral to the next AP English Literature Exam.
- Students must be prepared to respond to a variety of literary genres: prose fiction, drama, satire, and irony.
- Students must be familiar with examples of representative prose from multiple historical contexts, from the Renaissance to the contemporary, such as Donne, Milton, Swift, Lamb, Austen, and McCarthy.
- Students should read the prompts carefully and not come to the exam with preconceptions about them. For example, one exam may provide a suggested list of devices; another may not. One exam may require the writer to discuss social commentary, but another may emphasize character development. Prompts evolve from the passages and are written to stimulate and open up discussion, not to provide closure.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The prompt for question 3, the “open” question, began by noting that many writers use a country setting to establish values within a work of literature and illustrated that proposition by pointing out that the country may be a place of virtue and peace or one of primitivism and ignorance. Students were then asked to choose a novel or play in which such a country setting plays a significant role and write an essay in which they analyzed how the country setting functions in the work as a whole.

The aim of the prompt was to assess students’ ability to connect the country setting to values, thereby linking artistry to technique with theme, idea, or meaning. The illustrative phrase, “a place of virtue and peace or one of primitivism and ignorance,” suggested to students that setting can convey a range of positive or negative attributes. Moreover, the prompt deliberately focused on setting to steer students away from plot summary, the too-familiar bane of question 3. And the emphasis on “analyze how the setting functions” was designed to discriminate between upper- and lower-level essays.

How well did students perform on this question?

As usual, the prompt generated a wide range of scores, enabling readers to discriminate among essays. The mean score of 4.50 out of a possible 9 points was slightly better than the 2005 mean score of 4.43 and the second-best score on this exam. However, the fact that the mean on question 3 has not changed significantly in recent years raises the possibility that students are not substantially improving.

The shift from character analysis to setting enabled students to use a wide range of texts, as even the most minimalist texts, such as *Waiting for Godot*, have a setting worthy of analysis. Upper-level scores reflected essays that identified setting and values and analyzed the way various settings in a novel or play help convey important meanings. Lower-level scores reflected essays that failed to develop an argument about the function of the setting. Midrange essays, as usual, attended to the “what” (which settings) without the “why” (what meanings emerge through the country settings). In spite of confusion among some students about the reference for “country setting,” students found this question entirely accessible.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Unfortunately, the list of student errors or omissions does not change significantly from year to year. Nevertheless, the deficiencies are worth reporting again:

- Many students do not know very much about country (rural) life or values. In an increasingly urbanized nation, some students seem to find rural life as exotic as life in another country.
- Failing to ponder the prompt, many students (perhaps as many as 25 percent) read “country” to mean “nation/al” setting. This phenomenon was reflected at all score levels.
- Some students conflated nation with culture and wrote in general about the cultural setting within a nation.
- Less able students were unable to connect place to values or go beyond the enumeration of places.
- Some students lacked the vocabulary for writing with subtlety about values in the country or in a nation and tended to rely on the language of the prompt (virtue, peace, primitivism, and ignorance).
- The binary either/or directions in the prompt (virtue and peace or primitivism and ignorance) led weaker students away from complex both/and thinking, and steered them toward one-dimensional approaches to setting.
- Students continue to substitute summary and paraphrase for detailed analysis. Often students wrote in such generalities that Readers were uncertain that the students had actually studied the works they were writing about.
- Students sometimes chose texts that they had studied but that were not appropriate to the prompt. For example, *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* worked extremely well, but *Romeo and Juliet* almost always produced weak essays.
- Although students are encouraged to think beyond the list of titles appended to the prompt, they should be certain that their choices represent works of “equal literary merit.” Students have difficulty convincing Readers that juvenile fiction, dogmatic and propagandistic writing (including most popular religious fiction), and drugstore novels will stand the test of time.

- Students often waste time and energy by repeating the prompt before they launch into their discussions. Although this practice may function as a prewriting exercise, the prompt asks for an essay and for students to demonstrate critical thinking and sophisticated writing. Repeating the prompt does not demonstrate higher-level competencies.

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?

This prompt, which emphasized the relationship between a country setting and the values of that setting, sought to address an issue facing all AP English Literature teachers: what is the relevance of the skills we value and teach to the twenty-first-century teenager? In the present educational climate, too often beset by violence and the lure of pop culture, where schools and students may be striving to meet an array of local, state, and national requirements, students might wonder what the connections are between the reading they do in AP classes and the lives they lead. Question 3 provides teachers with the opportunity to show the connection between literary merit and ethical positions; between artistic style and the “business of living.” In this context, AP teachers should consider the following suggestions:

- Stress the importance of reading the prompt carefully, evaluating what it is asking, and responding to it directly.
- Emphasize the acquisition of vocabulary appropriate and essential to writing about meaning, values, and societal priorities.
- Encourage the use of specifics from the text, embedding the evidence in sentences and paragraphs.
- Encourage students to repeat the connections between the terms of their analysis and the requirements of the prompt. This strategy is essential in any argument.
- Provide students with practice writing assignments that connect artistic strategies to issues of societal problems, complex meanings, and the values implied by form and language.
- Reiterate again and again that the initial choice of a text may determine the score a student receives. Titles of little literary merit will not help a student score well even though the book may have significant meaning to the student.
- Stress that students must be familiar with the details of plot and character in a work. The inability to remember characters’ names or a sequence of events or crux of an action suggests an unfamiliarity that will work against the effectiveness of the essay.
- Encourage students *not* to depend on film versions of a book or play for the details of their analyses. If films are introduced in class, show explicitly how the film adapts or sometimes misuses or distorts the primary text.
- Teach students that generalizations without detailed support and paraphrase without analysis are serious flaws in an essay. Repeating the same idea three times with no significant new information does not strengthen an essay.