



Student Performance Q&A:
2007 AP[®] English Literature and Composition
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 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 two poems, Richard Wilbur's "A Barred Owl" and Billy Collins's "The History Teacher," and then to write a well-organized essay in which they compared and contrasted how the two poets employed literary devices to make their points. In this essay, students were expected to analyze how poets use the resources of the English language to achieve their aims. The intent of this question was to assess students' abilities to read closely and to pay attention to details in the texts, noting similarities and differences in the explanations that adults provide to children. 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 poems. Because these twentieth-century poems use familiar language, most students were able to respond to them on some level.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for responses to this prompt was 4.57 out of a possible 9 points, slightly above the mean score of 4.27 in 2006, but slightly below the mean score of 4.67 in 2005. The 2007 mean score for the poetry question was lower than that for question 3, but higher than that for question 2. However, this prompt discriminated very well. The spread of scores shows that nearly all students were able to connect with the poems. The most successful essays responded to the

complexities of relationships between adults and children, whereas the less competent managed to be engaged with the ideas on a minimal and sometimes simplistic level. The question was sufficiently open to support a variety of responses from students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As the mean scores from 2005 through 2007 indicate, Exam Readers did not find appreciable improvement in the abilities of students to read and explicate poetic texts. Many students were not equipped to compose effective responses that employed an analysis of poetic techniques. Exam developers intentionally did not provide a possible list of devices or techniques, because students tend to restrict themselves to the items listed in such a prompt. Inevitably, however, students resorted to whatever vocabulary they may have had at hand, even if the techniques they were familiar with had little significance in these texts. Too many students resorted to assertions that a technique existed (“The poet uses diction”) but 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 to formulate a thesis about how meaning is created through the resources of language.
- Students failed to support their generalizations with specific references to the texts.
- Students produced mechanical essays, providing meaningless introductions and repetitious conclusions, by clinging to a five-paragraph essay template.
- Students produced memorized lists of devices or techniques, sometimes even esoteric and sophisticated terms, but were unable to integrate the lists into intelligent commentary.
- Students were unable to distinguish between paraphrase or summary and analysis.
- Students were unable to show how a technique they could identify (or sometimes misidentify) contributed to the meaning of the poems.
- Students persisted in thinking in strictly dichotomous terms, unable to perceive the rich ambiguities that characterize human communication. Stark contrasts (black and white or good and bad) characterized their thinking.
- Students struggled to distinguish between literal and figurative uses of language.

The techniques common to close reading continue to baffle students. After nearly 50 years of AP emphasis on close reading, students do not appear to show much improvement. Rather than becoming more adept at reading complex texts, they seem to be reducing poetic texts to the “sound bites” with which they have become more and more familiar as TV and other technical devices have become ubiquitous.

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 teaching of poetry is a challenging exercise. Students often resist the mind-stretching practice of examining denotations, connotations, contexts, and syntactical relationships. Habits generated by a consumer-oriented society, including a multitude of distractions and obligations, militate against the thoughtful reading and analysis of texts. Students seem to believe that there are

shortcuts to analysis, such as those common to text messaging, which if memorized and employed on demand will produce good essays. When they are introduced to the elements of poetic language, such as hyperbole, simile, and metaphor, they memorize and regurgitate the definitions but are unable to analyze what meter, poetic form, or metaphor contribute to the poem. To counteract some of these deficiencies, teachers should consider the following measures:

- Remind students to read the prompt carefully and to respond to all its elements.
- Teach students that a prompt is a prompt, not a formula to be followed without thought. All elements of the prompt should be addressed, but the prompts are designed to encourage creative and nuanced thinking.
- Teach students to integrate and embed their textual evidence into sentences and paragraphs and to avoid simplistic and bald assertions.
- Encourage students to read slowly and to enjoy the rich ambiguities and complexities of language. In some cases, fewer examples may lead to better reading.
- Teach students that memorizing the name of a technique or being able to identify a technique is only the first step in analysis. The end is to explain how a technique contributes to meaning.
- Emphasize that an essay should integrate ideas into a coherent whole rather than producing discrete and isolated assertions or statements.
- Develop comparable prompts and require students to write in-class essays with similar time constraints. Then ask them to score the essays, using guidelines similar to those employed at the AP Reading.
- Write essays *with* students, and share your essays with them. Teachers who cannot write well to a prompt probably cannot teach students to write well.
- Use texts from all literary periods, from the medieval to the contemporary, and demonstrate that although some conventions may differ, certain techniques and genres are commonly employed.
- Help students understand that contemporary poetry, although superficially more accessible, may be as difficult as canonical texts.
- Develop poetry units that move consciously from simple and accessible texts to complex and challenging poems. Break down the reading tasks into identifiable and logical steps.
- Help students think in more complex ways, emphasizing that mature writing recognizes and explores the ambiguities and ironies that plague human existence. For example, the concept of irony continues to elude students.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully an accessible excerpt from Dalton Trumbo's novel *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939) and then in a well-organized essay to analyze how Trumbo uses such techniques as point of view, selection of detail, and syntax to characterize the relationship between

the young man and his father. The question served as a means of testing students' inferential thinking ability. The passage itself takes place in the main character's mind, as he recalls a key event in his boyhood when he summoned up the courage to suggest a departure from tradition to his father, and his father lent him a valuable fishing rod. The passage is a coming-of-age story in miniature.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed reasonably well on this question. The mean score of 4.45 out of a possible 9 points was the lowest of this year's three free-response questions and lower than the 4.59 mean of the 2006 question 2, but significantly better than the 4.32 mean of 2005. The great majority of students at least understood the language and situation. The more insightful ones brought depth of understanding to their interpretations and branched out beyond the three techniques suggested by the prompt (point of view, selection of detail, and syntax) to discern a rhetorical whole in which setting, situation, characterization, and symbolism are keys to understanding.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Less successful essays did not venture beyond the suggested techniques, allowing discussion of technique to take the place of an understanding of the relationship. Poorly developed ideas, a lack of quotations or other references to the text, and problems with defining and applying the terms *point of view* and *syntax* led many students to struggle with the task. The great majority of students echoed the prompt in the structure of their essays, writing a paragraph each on point of view, selection of detail, and syntax. Many of the best essays, on the other hand, were organized around character or theme. Because this year's prompt did not require an awareness of historical context or unusual vocabulary, problems endemic to writing about pre-twentieth-century prose did not emerge. However, Readers noted such generic problems as these:

- 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 dependent on the previous paragraph.
- Students lacked formal training in the application of key terms in literary analysis such as point of view, diction, and syntax. Even when they were able to define the terms, often they merely asserted that the author, for example, uses "progressive diction." They had difficulty moving from noting the presence of a technique to discussing *how* the technique contributes 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?

It can be difficult for high school students who have learned something about literary terms not to let the terms themselves take the place of true reading and writing for understanding. AP teachers need to teach their students more than a textbook definition of a literary term like "point of view." Perhaps the best thing teachers could do to deepen their understanding of the writer's process would be to attend a writer's conference, take a course in creative writing, or explore some of the useful and insightful works by writers on the craft of writing. Other suggestions include the following:

- Students need a vocabulary for addressing the key elements of literary analysis, but they also need practice applying the devices, moving from merely identifying devices to discussing the impact of the devices on meaning.
- Students must be taught the difference between paraphrase or summary and analysis. They have difficulty turning their observations into an argument.
- In order to understand the challenges students face, teachers should write to prompts as their students are writing and then share their results with the students.
- In addition to the specialized vocabulary of literary analysis, students need to enlarge their word bank, not employing exotic words for their own sake but choosing the exact word to express a precise thought.
- Students should be reminded that passages that are accessible, such as this year’s selection from twentieth-century prose, are not automatically easier to discuss.
- Students must be prepared to respond to a variety of literary genres: prose fiction, drama, satire, and irony.
- Students should read the questions carefully and not bring to the exam preconceptions about the prompts. 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 passages and are written to stimulate and open up discussion, not to provide closure. Similarly, students should practice writing to a variety of prompts and be taught to shape an essay that evolves out of the question and the passage.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The prompt for question 3, the “open” question, began by noting that in many works of literature, past events can affect, positively or negatively, the present actions, attitudes, or values of a character. Students were then asked to choose a novel or play in which a character must contend with some aspect of the past, either personal or societal, and then to write an essay in which they showed how the character’s relationship to the past contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

The aim of the prompt was to assess students’ abilities to move beyond the common problem of paraphrasing or summarizing plot by emphasizing the causal relationship between a character’s actions, attitudes, or values and an event in the past that affects the character either positively or negatively.

How well did students perform on this question?

The prompt generated a wide range of scores, enabling Readers to discriminate among essays. The 2007 mean score of 4.84 out of a possible 9 points was the highest of the three free-response questions and considerably higher than the 2006 mean score of 4.50 and the 2005 mean score of 4.43. The spread of scores was also greater for this question than for the other two. However,

although students performed better on this question, the fact is that over the years, mean scores have not shown much improvement in spite of valiant efforts to improve instruction.

The emphasis on character, rather than setting, may be one reason for the improved mean score, as the prompt encouraged students to deemphasize plot summary. Upper-level scores reflected essays that perceptively analyzed the causal relationship between past events and present actions, behavior, and attitudes. Lower-level scores reflected essays that failed to develop an argument about the causal relationship between past and present. Mid-range essays, as usual, attended to the “what” (what happened) without the “why” (the connection between past and present). Students found the question accessible and intriguing to think about.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many of the student errors or omissions are recurrent from year to year and are common to the three free-response prompts. However, because the examination does not work from a prescribed curriculum or provide a common passage for discussion, some issues are also prompt-specific.

- Students did not discriminate between description of events or behaviors and analysis of the causal relationship between past events and later ones. Others appeared to assume that their audience did not know the novel or play, and thus they shifted their focus away from a character analysis that would answer the prompt to a chronological summary of events. In some cases they neglected the prompt and failed to consider why the details that they described mattered.
- Students have difficulty with the concept of an essay. They depend upon a five-paragraph template or on preconceived ideas about a novel or play. The notion that an essay evolves organically from the prompt and the student’s knowledge of the work as a whole seems to escape them.
- Students sometimes chose texts that they had studied but that were not appropriate to the prompt. Inevitably, choosing a familiar text is essential, but an inappropriate text leads to a mediocre essay.
- Students are too dependent on a short list of texts (*Hamlet*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Huckleberry Finn*).
- Students frequently substituted summary and paraphrase for detailed analysis. The need for analysis cannot be overstated.
- Some students depend on cinematic versions of texts rather than on texts they have read.
- Students regularly failed to integrate their evidence into their sentences and paragraphs or even failed to provide any specific evidence at all. Sometimes they wrote in such generalities that Readers were uncertain what text the students were discussing.
- Students do not have a working knowledge of the terms necessary to literary analysis.
- Students are encouraged to think beyond the list of titles appended to the prompt, but they should be certain that their choices represent works of “equal literary merit.” Students need to realize that they will 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 well as a prewriting exercise, the prompt asks for an essay and for a demonstration of 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 asked students to discuss the causal relationship between a personal or societal past event and the actions, attitudes, or values of a character, sought to address an issue that many AP English Literature teachers face. That is, many students—who are confronted with violence in both their daily lives and in pop culture; who are stressed by an array of local, state, and federal testing mandates; or who are inundated with pressures from parents and peers—wonder what the connection is between the reading they do in their AP classes and the lives they lead. This prompt provides teachers with the opportunity to show the connection between the ideas in the best literature we read and teach and the ethical decisions students face every day. In this context, AP teachers should consider the following suggestions:

- Teach students to distinguish summary from analysis. Teach them to connect details they cite from the text to a larger analytical argument that answers the prompt, to write for an audience that is familiar with the text, and to focus the essay on the issues raised by the prompt rather than on a description of the novel or play.
- Teach students that generalizations without detailed support and paraphrase without analysis are serious flaws in an essay. Repeating the same idea three times without providing additional information does not strengthen the response.
- 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, teachers should show explicitly how the film adapts or frequently misuses or distorts the primary text. Films should be used discriminately in class and not as substitutes for literary analysis.
- 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 the crux of an action suggests an unfamiliarity with the text that will work against the effectiveness of an essay.
- Encourage the use of specifics from the text, embedding the evidence in sentences and paragraphs.
- Teach a spectrum of texts from classical and English literature. Year after year, student exam essays suggest that AP English Literature course reading lists tend to concentrate on the same five or six titles.
- Reiterate that the initial choice of a text may affect significantly the score an essay receives. Titles of little literary merit or titles that do not fit the prompt will not help a student write an essay that earns a high score, regardless of the significance of the title to the individual student.
- Encourage students to write essays that have introductions, middles, and conclusions. Although there is no inherent bias against the five-paragraph essay, student essays that enumerate mechanically pale against those that evolve organically from the prompt and the passage.