



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP[®] English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Susan Strehle of Binghamton University, the State University of New York at Binghamton. 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?

This question asked students to read carefully a passage from Shakespeare's play *Henry VIII* and to write a well-organized essay analyzing Shakespeare's use of literary techniques to convey Cardinal Wolsey's complex response to his dismissal from court. Although the passage is not technically a poem but rather a poetic passage from a play, it contains poetic language and techniques; these include allusion, figurative language, and tone, which the prompt invited students to consider as examples.

In its phrasing, the question asked students to analyze Wolsey's complex response to his sudden downfall from his position as advisor to the king. With the word "complex," the question encouraged students to see more than one dimension of thought and feeling in the speech, including potentially contradictory or conflicting responses. It asked students to connect content and technique: not only *what* Wolsey thinks and feels, but also *how* the playwright represents those complex responses through the use of literary elements.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.37 out of a possible 9 points, somewhat below the mean of 4.44 for the poetry question in 2008. Recent mean scores for the poetry question have ranged from a high of 4.67 in 2005 to a low of 4.27 in 2006. The prompt discriminated well, enabling Exam Readers to identify essays at all scoring levels.

Responses in the upper half of the scoring range offered reasonable analyses of Wolsey's speech, identifying various forms of complexity in his response to his dismissal. They often analyzed the imagery of nature, developing the impact of the "killing frost" and contrasting the "sea of glory" with "a rude stream" as Wolsey contemplates his future. They analyzed the varying tones that characterize Wolsey's changing emotions, and some responses discussed the figurative language reflecting the cyclical nature of life, the allusion to Lucifer's fall, and the metaphors of little boys in deep water. Lower-half responses listed literary devices without exploring how these contributed to Shakespeare's portrayal of Wolsey's response, or they missed the elements of complexity in Wolsey's speech.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was a tendency toward oversimplification and superficiality. The Development Committee deliberately included the word "complex" in the prompt ("Wolsey's complex response to his dismissal") in an effort to direct students to think about how Wolsey's speech reflects multiple emotions and conflicting reactions, but some students bypassed this potential source of rich analysis and focused instead on simple description of the speech.

Another common error was to peruse the list of literary elements identified in the prompt and comment in brief and limited ways on allusion, figurative language, and tone, rather than developing a more detailed and potentially rich analysis of one or two elements.

A third common flaw was the failure to connect *what* with *how* and *why*, identifying literary elements but not their contribution to meaning or, less often, describing some parts of the meaning of Wolsey's response but not its emergence from the ground of Shakespeare's literary devices.

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 teaching students to read poetry, teachers have an excellent opportunity to teach the skills of close analysis—and these skills are basic to students' success with college-level reading, writing, and thinking in all subjects. Because poetic language can differ greatly from "street speech" or the language spoken (and text messaged) by students in their daily lives, the analysis of poetry can open unique avenues for understanding the startling potential of elevated language shaped by poetic devices into a concentrated, complex poem. Readers of the AP English Literature and Composition Exam continue to believe that close readings of poetry in AP classes—in teachers' presentations, in class discussions, in students' group presentations, in written assignments, and on exams—are the single best preparation for success, not only on Question 1 specifically and the AP Exam generally, but also in college course work.

- Teach students to be able to identify and understand literary elements and devices *and also* to show what these elements contribute to the meaning of the text as a whole.
- Teach students to write articulate and persuasive statements on the meaning of texts and passages. The ability to interpret details linked to large themes or ideas will thrive if students have an eye and a vocabulary for meaning.

- Give students ample practice with close reading, both verbally and in writing, so that they can move from summary of a passage or poem to its broader meaning and the way meaning is revealed by symbols, tone, and figurative language.
- Work with the language of poetry, calling attention to difficult passages and uncommon words. Enlist students in understanding their meaning, both in general and contemporary terms, and in articulating the precise meanings created by the poet’s specific diction. Encourage research on words in dictionaries (including the OED), reward growing vocabularies, and emphasize the importance of language.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully the opening passage from Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* (1946) and then, in a well-organized essay, to analyze how Petry uses literary devices to establish the relationship between Lutie Johnson and the urban setting. In the prompt, imagery, personification, selection of detail, and figurative language were listed as literary devices to consider. The intent of the question was to assess students’ abilities to read closely; to analyze the relation between character and setting; to explore the author’s use of literary devices to contribute to the richness of textual meaning; and to control the elements of composition—developing a central idea and coherent units of analysis to support the main assertion.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.46 out of a possible 9 points. This score is well above last year’s mean of 3.93 for the prose question, which was the lowest mean score in four years. In 2005 the mean was 4.32, in 2006 it rose to 4.59, and in 2007 it dipped slightly to 4.45.

This year’s passage was accessible for almost all students, allowing weaker writers to respond with some analysis of the personification of the wind and the challenging urban environment. Better writers attended also to Lutie Johnson as the central figure whose struggle to find lodging reflects the human quest for “reasonable” accommodation in a hostile environment.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students were able to find examples of the literary devices listed in the prompt in the passage, but some students failed to move beyond enumeration to analysis. Weaker essays did not consider how the literary elements contributed to the meaning of the passage; sometimes they did not address Lutie Johnson’s relationship to the setting at all, focusing only on the actions of the wind. A broader group of students who earned scores in the middle range did not perceive any complexity in the passage, seeing only one facet of the character’s relation to the setting or describing this relation in superficial terms. The negative aspects of the urban setting were evident to most students, as was the personification of the wind, but some students did not use detail from the text to support claims about those elements of the passage or to develop more extended analyses of their contribution to its 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?

In teaching the analysis of prose passages, whether fiction or nonfiction, teachers may need to challenge students' assumption that prose is easy to understand and therefore that they can grasp the meaning of a passage on a first reading. If a student thinks the Petry passage can be simply summarized as the conflict between a woman seeking lodging and an urban environment resisting her efforts, the essay that results may neglect the more complicated, nuanced, and rich dimensions of this conflict that are developed through Petry's use of literary devices. Such an essay would limit its analysis of meaning to the more obvious level, rather than diving for deeper layers of understanding. Teachers can help students improve their performance by giving them practice in discussing meaning.

- Give students ample opportunities to articulate the meaning of passages of prose. Ask them to revise first drafts to expand and deepen their argument about the meaning of a passage.
- Teach students to read a prompt carefully. Many prompts direct students to complete a series of steps: read the passage carefully, write an analysis of its meaning, and consider the contributions to meaning made by literary devices. Students can complete the task more successfully if they begin with an exact grasp of what the prompt requires. In this question, for example, they were asked to analyze "how Petry establishes Lutie Johnson's relationship to the urban setting," a task that requires prior analysis of what that relationship means in the passage.
- At the same time, encourage students to respond to the passage with a clear interpretation that engages the details of the passage and with an organization that emerges out of the student's argument and interpretation of the passage. This kind of essay requires not only a strong reading of the passage but an ability to develop a response that organizes itself according to the student's own argument, not a preconceived formula such as the five-paragraph essay.
- Teach students to think, make notes, and prewrite before they begin to answer the question. Some students who dove into writing found their focus settled on the wind, which dominates the first part of the passage; they missed or came late to Lutie Johnson, who does not appear until line 35. Students who took time to analyze the entire passage found better ways to focus their essays on the relationship between character and setting.
- Encourage students to consider information they are given about the context for a passage. In this case, what do they know about urban America in 1946, the year Petry's novel was published?

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The prompt for Question 3, the “open” question, began by defining a symbol as “an object, action, or event that represents something or that creates a range of associations beyond itself.” The prompt added that symbols can “express an idea, clarify meaning, or enlarge literal meaning.” Students were then asked to select a novel or play, to focus on one symbol, and to write an essay analyzing how the symbol functions in the work; students were asked to analyze what the symbol reveals about characters or themes in the work as a whole.

The aim of this prompt was to assess students’ abilities to analyze the connection between one specific symbol and larger issues—idea, meaning, character, or theme—resonating through a text. To respond to the question successfully, students needed to write an effective and well-organized essay that moved beyond description or summary of events to articulate an argument about the text’s larger meanings as expressed through character or theme. They needed to show how the literary element of the symbol functions through its reappearances in the text to create, amplify, or reveal meanings.

How well did students perform on this question?

As they have in most recent years, students performed better on Question 3 than on the other two free-response questions; the mean score was 4.82 out of a possible 9 points. While this year’s mean is comparable to those of 2007 (4.84) and 2008 (4.80), it is higher than the mean scores in 2006 (4.50) and 2005 (4.43). The prompt generated a wide range of scores, allowing Readers to discriminate among essays at all score points.

Since a symbol functions as a literary device, usually signaling a recurring pattern that opens up the meaning of the work, this question steered students toward analysis and away from plot summary or description. Upper-level scores were given to essays that used persuasive analysis of a repeated symbol to develop a strong, detailed, nuanced argument about the meaning of the work or the development of character. Lower-level scores were given to essays that failed to develop an argument about the symbol or the work, reflected an oversimplified understanding of either or both, or advanced generalizations without textual support. Mid-range essays responded to the task with a plausible reading, but they tended to be superficial or underdeveloped in analysis. They often relied on plot summary that contained some analysis, implicit or explicit.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As in previous years, the most common student error in responding to Question 3 was to drift into plot summary or description, attempting to move toward the analysis of meaning through the process of re-narrating the events of a novel or play—but never arriving at analysis. While most students were able to identify a symbol in their chosen text and to select one with good potential for analytical thought, weaker responses described how the symbol fit into the plot rather than analyzing what it revealed about character or theme. Some students identified more than one symbol in the text and failed to link them thematically, creating a disconnected and superficial essay. Other students selected a single symbol but saw its function as limited and simple rather than complicated and nuanced. These students sometimes depended on the five-paragraph essay

template and asserted that the symbol functioned to reveal three one-dimensional ideas, but they did not see complexities yielding any three-dimensional developments.

Students occasionally depended on cinematic versions of texts rather than the written version, referring to elements in the film, and some students selected texts of questionable literary merit. A number of students repeated the prompt before beginning their discussion; this time would have been better invested in thought and prewriting notes leading toward analysis.

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 prompt for this question required students to consider the relationship between a symbol and the characters or themes of a work as a whole. Based on the quality of student responses, it is clear that AP teachers need to give students practice in writing about the connections between literary elements and meanings, between techniques and themes or characters.

- Teach students to write with confidence about literary elements and devices *and also* to write articulate arguments about what these elements contribute to the meaning of the text as a whole.
- Teach students how to write about the meaning of texts and passages. Students who can explain the meaning of a text can develop better analyses of the ways meaning appears in symbols, textual details, and figurative language, while students who cannot clearly make an argument about a text's meaning can rarely write strong essays about its literary techniques.
- Give students ample practice with close reading, both verbally and in writing, so that they can analyze the meaning of a novel or a play and the ways meaning is revealed by symbols, tone, or figurative language. Assign essays requiring students to identify the relationship of some part of a work (character, event, or technique) to the work's overall meaning.
- Teach students to use specifics from the text in all their essays, both those written with the text open and those written from memory. Essays that use appropriate details to illustrate their claims, embedding examples and even remembered quotations inside their arguments, are often sophisticated, persuasive, and successful.
- Continue to teach a wide range of texts, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as from more recent times, and from English, American, and world literature. Readers reported that over 250 different titles were discussed for this question, and the wide variety of texts suggests that AP teachers are engaging a rich and interesting selection of novels and plays.
- Encourage students to approach the AP Exam with several texts about which they could write well. Then, at the exam, students can choose the text that best fits the year's prompt. The choice of text can affect the score an essay receives; each year, some choices result in formulaic essays, while others lead to more sophisticated and interesting analysis. A student who approaches the exam with detailed knowledge of several texts will be able to make good choices.

- At the same time, encourage students to be familiar with the details in the text, including names and significant actions. Students need to write about texts of which they have a recent and relatively extensive knowledge.
- Help students learn to write essays that articulate an interpretive argument at the beginning. An essay that evolves directly and organically from the prompt and advances a clear answer to the question is likely to be effective.