



Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP® English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 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 in 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 the poem “A Story” by contemporary poet Li-Young Lee and to write a well-developed essay analyzing how the poet conveys the complex relationship of the father and the son through the use of literary devices such as point of view and structure.

With its emphasis on “the complex relationship,” the question was designed to lead students to consider the father’s mixed feelings about the present and future connections between himself and his son. The prompt asked students to consider how the poet creates multiple dimensions of meaning through the use of literary elements and to develop an interpretation of the poem through analysis of the connection between technique and meaning.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.28 out of a possible 9 points. This reflects a decline from the previous year, when the mean was 4.33. Responses that earned scores in the upper half of the score range were distinguished by their insights into the complex divisions within the father and the differences between father and son. These essays often articulated insights into the father’s fear of a future separation from his son and his ironic inability to respond to the son’s simple plea for a new story in a setting full of books and stories. Using appropriate examples and quotations from the poem, they offered substantial interpretations of the use of point of view in the poem, as well as other literary techniques including diction, selection of detail and tone. Essays that scored in the lower half tended to avoid the complexity of the poem, understanding the father’s relation to his son in simple terms as either loving and strong or silent and fearful. They often summarized or described the poem, using quotations in support of paraphrase rather than interpretation.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error in approaching this accessible poem was to substitute summary and description of its contents for analysis of its meanings. In attempting to write their way toward analysis, some students found little to say about the relationship between father and son and less to say about its complexity. Some missed the multifaceted quality of the father's reaction as he experiences longing and anxiety, love and fear.

Other common errors arose in students' discussions of the literary elements in the poem and their relation to the meaning of the work. Students found structure difficult to see in this poem, which on the surface appears deceptively simple and unstructured. In approaching structure, they often described the stanzas without considering other structuring devices like planes of time moving from present to future, or the sets of oppositions, including thought and speech, emotion and logic, presence and absence. Students might profitably have considered additional literary techniques such as diction, tone and selection of detail, and the ways in which these techniques help to convey 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?

Mean scores for the poetry question have declined consistently over the past five years. This year, most students wrote weaker essays on the short contemporary poetry selection than they did on the long, challenging 19th-century prose passage. The poem appears to be so accessible and complete on its surface that many students were not able to find the levels of richness in the relationship between father and son. This suggests that students need considerably more help in understanding and writing analysis of poetry than they are receiving.

This year's poetry question also suggests that students may not be as well prepared to analyze techniques and articulate meanings in contemporary free verse as they are to identify techniques in more traditional poetic forms. The following suggestions may be helpful in this regard:

- Teach students to analyze poetry from a wide range of periods, including contemporary free verse.
- Emphasize the teaching of poetry in AP classes, recognizing that students may find the language and conventions of poetry more puzzling than those of prose. Assign students to analyze the meanings of poems. Combine discussions of well-known poems with assignments requiring students to identify meanings in a poem they have not seen.
- Give students practice identifying complexities in literary texts and articulating the ways in which characters' motives, ideas, or actions can contain conflicting or self-contradictory elements. To explore the representation of complexity in literature, students need to understand how divergent or different elements can coexist without a simple resolution.
- Teach students to distinguish description of what is in a poem from analysis of its meanings. Help them develop a vocabulary for the poem's themes and reflections on profound issues.
- When teaching students to identify the literary devices that give poetry its unique power, give priority to the connections between these techniques and the poem's meanings.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully a passage from *Middlemarch* by George Eliot and to write an essay analyzing how Eliot portrays Rosamond and Tertius Lydgate and their complex relationship as husband and wife. The prompt invited students to consider such devices as narrative perspective and selection of detail.

This question intended to assess students' abilities to read closely, with attention to language, perspective and detail, and to sort out contradictory elements in the two characters and their conflict over the financial difficulties they face. At the same time the question intended to assess students' abilities to write an effective essay, one with a governing central idea about the complex relationship, organized in coherent units of analysis and supported with appropriate evidence from the passage.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.65 out of a possible 9 points, well above the mean score of 4.14 in 2010 and the highest mean score for the prose passage in the past seven years. Essays that earned scores in the upper half of the score range built analysis of the characters out of close readings of the text; these essays often paid attention to point of view and to the ways the sympathetic but discerning omniscient narrator shapes readers' attitudes toward the characters. Essays that scored in the lower half often chose between the two characters, finding one deserving of praise and the other of blame, and ignored the narrator.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was to see the two characters in overly simple terms and thus to miss the complexities in their relationship by choosing one side of their dispute as the "right" perspective. Some students saw Rosamond as a spoiled spendthrift, for example, and Lydgate as a concerned husband dedicated to fiscal responsibility. Others saw Rosamond as innocent, undervalued and oppressed, and Lydgate as self-important and arrogant. Each of these positions led to readings that ignored the narrator's mix of sympathy and criticism for both characters that makes Eliot's representation of their relationship interesting.

Another common error was to select an overly general framework for interpreting the passage: some students saw it as an example of marital advice, for example, while others saw it as a demonstration of Victorian-era gender conventions. These kinds of arguments about the passage often led to generalizations about marriage or gender relations in the Victorian era, and in lower-half essays the assertions did not refer to or analyze specific language or details in the passage.

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?

Strong student writers were able to perceive the mixed evaluations of both characters by a narrator who sees their flaws in a larger human and cultural context. Although some students find it challenging to understand the complicated mixture of attitudes in “both/and” representations like this passage, their ability to write with sophistication about complexity increases when they can form an argument that accommodates multiple and even conflicting attitudes. To help students succeed in their responses to the prose question, consider the following:

- Give students practice analyzing passages in which a character has a complex and divided set of characteristics. Have students explore the meaning of contradictory details in the representation of a complex character. Encourage analysis that does not arrive at a choice between conflicting sides, attitudes or characters.
- The analysis of prose usually includes the understanding of point of view. Teach students to name and think with confidence about variations on omniscience, ranging from an impersonal and detached watcher to Eliot’s large-minded, understanding and empathetic narrator who sees both inside and out, both husband and wife, both admirable and selfish characteristics. Spend time with the potential variations on point of view and their implications for the representation of character. Students who can discuss point of view with confidence can often make strong arguments about prose passages.
- Encourage students to develop an argument in answer to the question before they begin to write. Students who dive right in often begin by describing the contents of the passage and work their way toward an interpretive argument only as they end, resulting in an unpersuasive essay. A better strategy is to spend time making notes, developing an interpretation that addresses the prompt, and then to write the essay.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to select a character from a novel or play who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice and to write a well-developed essay that analyzed the character’s understanding of justice, the degree to which the character’s search for justice is successful, and the significance of the search for the work as a whole.

This question was intended to lead students to discuss the concept of justice in the text as the chosen character understands it. Students were invited to focus not on the events of the text, but on the relative success of the search for justice and in this way to analyze theme rather than to describe plot. By suggesting that they consider “the degree to which” the search was successful, the question intended to open up the complex understanding that some quests might be partially but not wholly successful. By asking for the significance of the search for the work as a whole, the question directed students to broaden their analysis by relating the character’s search to the central themes and meanings of the text.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.58 out of a possible 9 points, compared with 4.49 in 2010. As in previous years, students performed better on this question than they did on the poetry question, but unlike previous years, not as well as on the prose question, perhaps because of the richness and accessibility of this year's prose passage. Students who earned scores in the upper half of the score range typically selected characters that had significant experiences with justice or injustice. The best responses defined justice clearly in relation to the character, assessed the relative success of the search for justice, and persuasively linked the search for justice to the meaning of the work as a whole. Essays that scored in the upper half were also well organized, confidently written and effectively argued with the support of telling details from the text.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students skipped the part of the question that asked them to analyze the character's understanding of justice, or they defined justice in thin, implausible or unpersuasive ways, arguing, for example, that for Edna Pontellier justice is the freedom of the ocean, or for Macbeth it is becoming king. Weaker responses had some difficulty establishing the significance of justice both to the character and to the work as a whole. Some students saw the success of the quest for justice in absolute terms rather than finding a relative or partial success, as in *Hamlet*, where justice is achieved at the cost of several lives.

As always, the most common error was to summarize plot. Many essays began with a description of the character's quest: an original event in which justice is violated, a series of events developing the quest for redress, and the concluding events in which the character may or may not achieve justice. Some of these essays moved from plot summary toward a statement about how the quest for justice related to the meaning of the work as a whole, but these statements were sometimes thin, underdeveloped and insufficiently related to the preceding details. Weaker essays also substituted general ideas about a text for specific thinking about justice, or sweeping ideas about a character's progress for analysis of a character's search for justice. Such essays tended to be poorly organized, conversational in their language and thin in their development.

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?

AP teachers tell students that they need to address the prompt specifically and directly, keeping its terms in the foreground of their essays. But under exam pressure, some students disregard this crucial advice, especially in their responses to Question 3. AP teachers select a wide range of drama and fiction for their courses, but students sometimes select characters or texts that are not well suited to the prompt. To help students successfully respond to Question 3, consider the following:

- Remind students to review the range of texts they have studied and to choose carefully when they see the prompt for Question 3. The choice of a text that is well suited to the prompt can lead to a better essay, while strong texts that do not fit the prompt can lead to strained and unpersuasive analysis. A student who approaches the test with detailed knowledge of several texts will be able to make better choices.
- Encourage students to be familiar with and to use specific details from the text in their essays. Students write better essays when they can use appropriate details to illustrate their claims, citing examples and even a few remembered quotations. Students write weaker essays when they misremember characters' names and can provide only general descriptions of significant moments that are crucial to their analysis. Students need to write about texts of which they have a recent and detailed knowledge.

- Encourage students to prewrite on the specific issues raised by the prompt before they begin an essay. Ask them to develop an argument that answers the question before they begin and to articulate this argument early in their essay. Give students practice in developing organizational structures for their essays out of the terms and concepts in the prompt.
- Teach students to articulate the themes or meanings of the work as a whole. Students who have an argument about the meanings of their chosen text can develop better analysis of the text in relation to any prompt. They can also relate literary technique to meaning in more satisfying ways, interpreting character or setting, for example, as a deliberately designed expression of the author's literary meaning.
- Continue to teach a wide range of texts, from traditional and contemporary periods, from English, American and world literature. The wide variety of texts on which students wrote this year shows that AP teachers include a rich selection of novels and plays.