



AP[®] English Language 2001 Scoring Commentary

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Question 1

Sample AAAA – Excellent (Score=9)

This young writer focuses upon Eliot’s purpose for writing and offers convincing evidence for his or her claim that Eliot offers the fledgling Pierce advice about writing in order to console her and to help her in her struggle to master her craft. The student discusses a number of specific strategies and explains how they work and, more importantly, why they are particularly effective for their intended audience: the letter’s tones of humility and sympathy, the use of metaphors that are directly related to female experience, the use of personal experience to establish both authority and a feeling of kinship, and the use of allusion and paradox. The student sees Eliot’s move to narrow the chasm between aspiring writers and great ones as a persuasive argument and suggests why this strategy would be particularly comforting and inspiring to Pierce.

The response clearly meets the criteria for excellence; its analysis is especially apt because it demonstrates the student’s understanding of the important relationship between argument, purpose, and audience. The essay also demonstrates a generally impressive control of language; its syntax is especially varied and fluent, its command of diction is evident, and it contains only a few minor errors of production. The student can, therefore, be forgiven for thinking that the faculty consultants will join him or her in shared amusement at the description of the writing process as “the agony of what some have called ‘mental constipation.’” Because the essay demonstrates superior analytical and persuasive skills and is written in prose that is mature in most instances, the faculty consultants were willing to forgive the student’s somewhat immature metaphor for a writer’s frustration.

Sample QQQ – Very Good (Score=8)

This essay also conveys a clear understanding of Eliot’s purpose and the way in which she uses rhetoric to reach her audience. While it lacks the insight and fluency of the 9-point response, the essay offers a strong analysis of the functions of specific strategies. The student provides solid explanations of how Eliot uses sympathy and empathy, figurative language, allusions, and personal experience to convince Mrs. Pierce that she should continue writing. Although the student’s approach is somewhat less interesting to read than some, he or she offers a convincing argument that Eliot is writing to encourage her admirer and an insightful interpretation of Eliot’s stance on how a writer develops.

Occasionally, the student includes more of Eliot’s text than is economical or necessary, and the essay’s prose is not always as sophisticated as the student’s analytical skills. However, the essay has syntactical variety, and its prose is generally effective and contains only minor flaws. Even though its introduction and conclusion are rather perfunctory, as a whole the essay offers perceptive observations that are well supported with textual references.

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Question 1 (cont.)

Sample RRR – Good (Score=7)

This essay offers an analysis of Eliot’s rhetorical strategies that relies too heavily upon programmatic approaches and, as a consequence, fails to make the most of the student’s insights. Focusing upon the stand-bys of diction and syntax in her second paragraph, the student devotes a considerable part of her essay to a discussion that is rather unproductive and yields very little insight. But the student fares better in her third and fourth paragraphs as he or she discusses Eliot’s style and use of personal experience, or what the student refers to as “personal confessions.”

Less convincing than the higher-scoring essays, this essay, nonetheless, has much to commend it: its discussion of Eliot’s subtle use of language to instruct without being “condescending or arrogant,” its explanation of what makes Eliot’s personal experience persuasive, and its recognition that Eliot is teaching the younger Pierce through her suggestions about the parallels between the two writers’ lives. However, the essay’s reliance upon the five-paragraph format weakens its overall effectiveness, leading the young writer into needless repetition and preventing him or her from developing a more organic structure that would strengthen his or her strongest insights.

Question 2

Sample DDDD – Excellent (Score=9)

Combining the analytical and the personal, this essay uses vivid, distinctive style to demonstrate a deep understanding of Oliver’s relationship to nature; it earned the faculty consultants’ praise for its lively discussion of how Oliver’s sensual language reflects the sexually charged nature of her relationship to the natural world. Examining the disquietude that Oliver’s unabashed physical celebration of, and connection to, the natural world can produce in some readers — a feeling that various young writers mentioned but had difficulty defining or discussing in any great depth — the student explores why Oliver and her roses seem “too close.” Through a series of allusions, the student explains the “awkward, indulgent feeling” that the writing seems to elicit. In developing his or her position that Oliver “seems in love — in lust with the world” and in explaining how Oliver achieves this complex effect, the student “borrows” many techniques from Oliver: a seemingly honest exploration of a topic that can make some readers uncomfortable (as much good writing does), the element of surprise and paradox, the use of parallel structure to strengthen the expansive connections and claims that the essay makes, and the use of repetition (the series of “it is” constructions in the essay’s concluding sentences) to drive home the essay’s rather unconventional point.

While the student’s spelling is sometimes as imaginative as his or her prose, the essay clearly elucidates less-than-obvious aspects of Oliver’s style and more than compensates for its lapses in mechanics. Despite the energy of his or her prose, the student neither overstates his or her claim nor reduces the passage to allegory or symbolism, carefully writing, instead, that the “passage can almost be looked at as a sexual encounter.” This essay demonstrates both a particularly impressive control of language and an especially apt analysis.

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Question 2 (cont.)

Sample H – Very Good (Score=8)

This essay also has much to praise. The student offers a convincing argument that the passage focuses on “the extreme of terror and the extreme of beauty” by explaining how Oliver’s massing of details, use of repetition, and imagery help her to accomplish her goal. In this process, the student offers faculty consultants ample exemplification and explanation. The essay’s third paragraph does, however, take a wrong turn in attempting to explain an effect that Oliver achieves by omitting concrete details, overlooking much of Oliver’s pointed description of the owl’s toes and beak. Recognizing his or her error, the student added a hasty “in general” in an attempt to soften this miscue.

Faculty consultants did not see this lapse in analysis as a major fault, because it occurs in an otherwise strong essay. Instead, the readers allowed this flaw to enter into their holistic evaluation of the student’s otherwise insightful response. The student’s prose is also not flawless, but it demonstrates an ability to control a wide range of the elements of effective writing. Overall, the essay offers a successful analysis of how Oliver’s style reflects her complex response to nature, even though he or she seems less aware of the important role that contrasts play in creating Oliver’s overall effect.

Sample LLL – Good (Score=7)

This student sees Oliver’s characterization of nature as an inexplicable, uncontrollable, and mysterious force and argues that details and syntax are the essential elements in creating this portrait. The student’s discussion of details is full, providing many specific examples to support his or her insights and offering believable explanations of how they work. The paragraph devoted to Oliver’s use of syntax is also full, and the student’s observations are well supported by direct references to the text.

While the essay demonstrates little personal voice and the prose contains minor flaws, it is clear and sufficiently organized. The quality of its prose in no way undermines the quality of its analysis, which is somewhat greater than that of the essays that are scored as merely adequate.

Question 3

Sample IIII – Excellent (Score=9)

Essentially qualifying Sontag’s argument by countering her claim with his own that “all art forms limit our understanding of the world,” the student who wrote this essay demonstrates a clear understanding of how rhetorical strategies are essential in convincing his or her intended audience. Some readers (and perhaps Sontag) might find the student’s essay too dismissive to be persuasive, for he or she eventually claims that Sontag is “making a sweeping generalization about an art form that she knows little about,” but this claim is delayed until the student has established an ethos that suggests he or she is entitled to speak with such authority.

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Question 3 (cont.)

Consequently, the faculty consultants generally found the student's fearless confidence to be refreshing and appreciated the writer's ability to marshal evidence to support his or her edifying discussions and impassioned claims, and they admired the student's ability to create a particularly effective organic structure that enticed and moved them to share the student's passion. Launching reader and writer into a mutual consideration of the nature of photography with questions that initially suggest the student agrees with Sontag, he or she withholds the essay's unexpected-but-carefully-prepared-for qualification (and thesis) until the final paragraph. After offering fully-developed yet competing philosophies about the nature of photography, the student ends the essay with a fanfare of rhetorical questions and firmly establishes his or her position on photography: it may distort or limit, but no more than Sontag's chosen medium of words, and no more than other artistic mediums. This is a brave stance, for it manifests a trust that the students' audience, teachers of English, will accept the student's argument that the preferred medium many of them share with Sontag is no exception.

In addition to its demonstration of sophisticated persuasive and argumentative skills and its exemplification of the inherent relationship between content and form, the essay's persuasiveness also depends upon its vigorous prose. The student's ability to combine logic and persuasive language is especially important in shaping the faculty consultants' positive response. Given the less-than-40 minutes in which it was conceived and written, the essay is a particularly impressive accomplishment.

Sample G – Very good (Score=8)

When it is read after the rather remarkable 9-point essay, this response may appear less successful than it really is. Taking a stand that is similar to that of the writer of the 9-point essay, this writer also disagrees with Sontag's claim that photography limits our understanding of the world. Gathering evidence from photographs of the Oklahoma bombing and the famous photograph of an American sailor celebrating the end of World War II with a kiss, the student successfully establishes and supports his or her position that photography is a "mental, verging on spiritual, illumination." Making a rather effective play on the cliché that plagued the exam, the student argues that a viewer must "listen" for the thousand words that are captured in a photograph and implies that Sontag fails to do so.

While the student's prose style and argumentation are less sophisticated than that of the writer of the 9-point essay, he or she demonstrates considerable control of language. The essay is relatively free of errors and offers both logical and emotional appeals to persuade the audience that its position is credible. Although it is not as striking or profound as the preceding essay, this essay offers the faculty consultants a successful and appealing argument.

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Question 3 (cont.)

Sample W – Good (Score=7)

This student chose to agree with Sontag’s claims that photography limits our understanding of the world and that photography is “the most irresistible form of mental pollution.” Supplementing Sontag’s examples and argument, the student faults photography for being a poor substitute for reality. In doing so, the essay offers two hypothetical examples, one that is much more successful than the other. The first, in paragraph 2, reveals the student’s limited ability to create plausible reality. The second, which occurs in paragraph 3, seems more believable — perhaps because it is grounded in a scene that both student and faculty consultants have possibly shared: the incongruence between a photograph of a McDonald’s burger and the actual burger itself. Here the student’s ability to describe the hypothetical is significantly more impressive and more convincing, perhaps because (ironically, given the student’s argument that reality is always preferable) it is much closer to the student’s actual experience, as are the “feminine screams and giggles” that the student includes in paragraph 4.

While the student’s language occasionally slips into rather unpolished diction and unconvincing hyperbole, it frequently displays a sense of humor and engaging playfulness that strengthen and counterbalance the essay’s purposeful argumentation. The clear, coherent prose, and the essay’s generally correct usage help establish it as slightly better than adequate.