

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2018 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	404,014		
• Number of Readers	1,022		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	22,826	5.6
	4	58,765	14.5
	3	109,700	27.2
	2	145,307	36.0
	1	67,416	16.7
• Global Mean	2.57		

The following comments on the 2018 free-response questions for AP[®] English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David Miller, Mississippi College. 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 preparation 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.

The Chief Reader was assisted in this report by observations and comments from the three operational question leaders: Esther Jones Cowan, Eric Bishop, and Charles Toombs.

Question #1

Task: Poetry Analysis

Topic: Olive Senior, “Plants”

Max. Points: 9

Mean Score: 4.13

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

For Question 1, the poetry analysis question, students were asked to read Olive Senior’s poem “Plants” and respond to the following prompt:

Carefully read Olive Senior’s 2005 poem “Plants.” Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the poet portrays the complex relationships among the speaker, the implied audience, and plant life. You may wish to consider the author’s use of such literary techniques as syntax, diction, and figurative language. Students were expected to do three tasks successfully:

- They were to **read** carefully.
- They were to **analyze** how the poet portrays the complex relationships in the poem.
- They were to **write** a well-organized essay on that topic.

These expectations mirrored those on recent exams. These expectations are also interrelated and interdependent. Reading aids analysis, but analysis also affects rereading. The ideas gathered during reading and refined during analysis become the content basis for the essay, and the act of writing often leads to further analysis and more in-depth reading as students gather and organize textual details to support their points.

These terms—reading, analyzing, and writing—were defined in the 2017 Chief Reader Report. To clarify, those definitions are reiterated here.

- **Reading** carefully means employing the techniques practiced during students’ Advanced Placement class and engaging with qualities (that is, the kind of text, the difficulty of the text, and the necessary context), terms (in this case, the prompt suggested some literary techniques as a beginning point for students, although these were not required), and characteristics (the unique nature of the structure, organization, or presentation of the text) related to the study of poetry.
- **Analyzing** means identifying the important parts of a larger whole and being able to explain how those parts connect to and function within that whole. In this case, students needed to identify the parts of the poem that led to an understanding of the relationships among the speaker, the implied audience, and plant life. The word “complex” here is a cue to the students that they might see contradictory, shifting, paradoxical, or even opposing elements of those relationships. Students, then, had to articulate how the poet portrayed those relationships.
- Finally, **writing** a well-organized essay means understanding how students’ own thoughts about the text are connected; being able to support those assertions with clear, concrete examples; and cueing the reader with the appropriate compositional techniques, such as establishing an assertive, defensible thesis and using transitional devices to reveal how ideas are connected.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Overall, students were able to read and comprehend the poem and write about the relationships within the poem. They were able to recognize the first person speaker (which some elided with the poet herself), second-person address, and the militaristic and colonizing diction of the poem. Most students were able to recognize and name some of the literary devices used in the poem; personification, metaphor, tone, and diction. Students arrived at the idea of “complexity” in those relationships in a variety of ways, and many were able to marshal textual support that pointed toward that complexity. The accessibility of the poem inspired confidence in student writers across the range of abilities, so that even essays scoring in the lower half of the scoring guide were often longer than in past years. The mean score for this question was significantly higher than the 2017 mean score.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students substituted “relatability” for analysis and interpretation. (analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The author also compels his audience to truly examine the nature surrounding them by inquiring as to whether they’ve regarded the mechanisms of the plant life around them through the use of a rhetorical question. By soliciting an answer from his audience, Senior implores them to truly take the malevolent nature of nature into consideration.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students identified poetic features but were unable to connect them to create a cohesive discussion. (analysis, writing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Senior’s use of a sinister tone throughout the piece, even when describing plants, emphasizes the didactic nature of his words. By portraying plants as scary, the author is able to open the mind of the reader to a new perspective . . . ” “Also common in Senior’s sentence structure are informal addresses and questions, as are especially evident when Senior calls the reader out for trusting flowers—‘—don’t deny it, my dear, I’ve seen you/sniff and exclaim’ (25-26). Here, Senior refers to his reader in a condescending and informal way, almost like a parent speaking to a child (‘my dear’). This establishes position [<i>sic</i>] of power in a benevolent-seeming way.”

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students struggled to explain how the poet “portrayed” those complex relationships using literary techniques. (analysis, writing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Senior assumes the role of an enlightened intellectual who warns his audience, general humankind, of the insidious behaviors of plants—their widespread and ever-spreading nature, in both political (military) and sexual comparisons to human society. Through his comparisons to easily accessible imagery, Senior’s claim becomes more effective to the general audience he seeks.”
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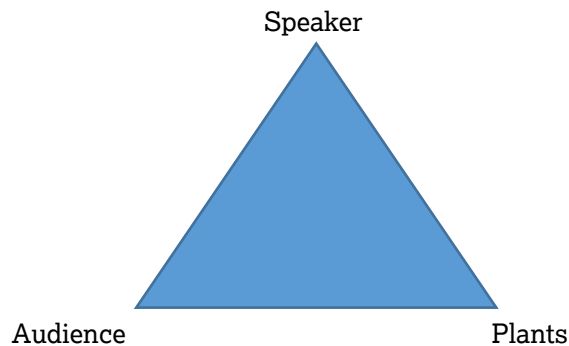
Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

1. In addition to helping students move beyond simply paraphrasing poetry (see the comments in the 2017 report), teachers should also help students move beyond “relatability” to real analysis. While emphasizing “relatability” can suggest universality and provide students a way to access ideas, it may also confuse personal responses with reasoned responses—or at least prevent students from perceiving the difference between the two kinds of responses.

One way to accomplish this is to help students understand that poets are artists with ideas of their own and that poetry is specialized language which presents ideas through images. A teacher of poetry can help students to understand that poetry is not just broken prose or emotive images, but operates with both structure and content to present ideas about the phenomena of the world. In the same way, readers of poetry are given the task of understanding those ideas, using the tools of literary analysis, not simply finding personal connections with them. One should not begin a discussion of poetry by asking how it makes students “feel” or if they can “relate” to it. As I suggested last year, teachers should be wary of only focusing on personal responses or connections.

2. Teachers should continue to help students understand key ideas such as “analysis” and “complexity” when approaching all literature, but particularly poetry. Analysis means the identification of key parts and understanding how those parts contribute to a whole. Complexity means dealing with all features and allowing, even expecting, contradictory or paradoxical possibilities. This would help students avoid oversimplifying or jumping to conclusions.

With this year’s poem, it might be helpful to try to map how the speaker (who may or may not be the same as the poet) feels about both the plants and the audience using a simple triangle map:



Students might be invited to create word clusters around both the plants and the audience to see if those clusters are complementary, contradictory, or paradoxical. Then, the students could create a word cluster around the speaker, and teachers could ask students to defend their choices related to the speaker. Teachers might then help students to see the poet as doing creative and intentional work, making significant choices in writing that are meant to shape the reader’s experiences. Teasing out those creative and intentional choices can show the student how poetry—and by extension all writing—“works.” It’s not just about what the poem says, but about how the poem operates.

3. Finally, I would suggest that teachers read and analyze poetry together with the students without having a reading or interpretation already prepared. Mirroring with the students the experience of reading a new poem teaches them the process of identifying and interpreting, rethinking and revising. Teachers might consider allowing the students to choose a poem each week from the last three issues of *The New Yorker* or from the “Poem of the Day” on poets.org and then exploring it together with the teacher as a “reader among equals.”

Question #2

Task: Prose Analysis

Topic: Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*

Max. Points: 9

Mean Score: 3.94

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

For Question 2, the prose analysis question, students were asked to read an excerpt from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Blithedale Romance* and respond to the following prompt:

The following interchange, excerpted from an 1852 novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, occurs when two characters who have been living on the Blithedale Farm—a community designed to promote an ideal of equality achieved through communal rural living—are about to part ways. Read the passage carefully. In a well-written essay, analyze how Hawthorne portrays the narrator’s attitude towards Zenobia through the use of literary techniques.

Students were expected to accomplish the following tasks successfully:

- They were to **read** carefully.
- They were to **analyze** how the author portrays the narrator’s attitude toward another character using literary techniques.
- They were to **write** a well-written essay.

Again, the three tasks are interrelated and interdependent.

- **Reading** carefully means reading “closely,” employing the techniques practiced during the Advanced Placement class, and engaging with qualities (that is, the kind of text, the difficulty of the text, and the necessary context), terms (the particular techniques and elements related to analysis), and characteristics (the unique structure or presentation of the text) related to the study of prose. Reading in this way begins with the assumption of meaning, and students should, even at first reading, begin to pay attention to how particular features of the text contribute to meaning.
- **Analyzing** means identifying the important parts of a larger whole and being able to explain how those parts connect to and function within that whole. In this case, students needed to identify the ways in which the author revealed the narrator’s attitude. The prompt did not ask the students to be familiar with utopian communities in 19th-century America or to be aware of changing economic and gender contexts, although all of these inform the novel as a whole. Instead, students were to identify how the author, Hawthorne, uses literary techniques to reveal the narrator’s relationship with Zenobia in the given passage.
- Again, **writing** a well-written essay means controlling many features, including a defensible thesis, full development and textual support for ideas, clear connections and transitions that help cue the reader, and an attention to the standard conventions of writing.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The passage from Hawthorne’s novel was accessible for the majority of students. Students were able to recognize, on some level, the narrator’s complex attitude toward Zenobia. With no listing of terms in the prompt itself, students commented on a variety of literary techniques, including diction, dialogue, and syntax. Students were able to identify important details in the passage’s imagery, pointing often to the mirrors in the passage and the repeated references to light, or the contrast between the rural nature of Blithedale Farm and the opulence of Zenobia’s room. Many students

observed that the features of the room reflected Zenobia’s character and that the narrator’s responses to the room were clues to the narrator’s response to Zenobia herself. Since students had the text, they were also able to assemble textual evidence to support various points. The mean score for this question was nearly equivalent to the mean score in 2017.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students oversimplified the narrator’s attitude or the characters’ relationship. (reading, analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The narrator very well may have cared for or even loved Zenobia, evident by the internal struggles he deals with about his convictions with her. However, in the end, he strived [<i>sic</i>] to break the façade around Zenobia, aiming to find the truest form of her and the state of who they are to one another.” “The shifts of the narrators [<i>sic</i>] attitudes towards Zenobia, first submissive and accepting, then irritated, and lastly righteous and sure, help create the realization that labels, such as selfish or selfless, are not perfect, and people cannot be defined by just one word.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students allowed literary techniques to become the argument instead of using them to support an argument. (analysis, writing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The narrator describes their viewpoint on Zenobia’s current situation as being ‘self-indulgent,’ ‘brilliant,’ & ‘costly.’ The diction used creates a sense that the narrator is in awe of what Zenobia has surrounded herself with. However, they also see these furnishings as a reflection on Zenobia being ‘proud,’ imposing’ and ‘incapable of pure and perfect taste.’”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students relied on long quotations instead of focused or specific references and often offered quotations without commentary or analysis. (analysis, writing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See the example immediately above. “It is beautiful, ‘the fulfillment of every fantasy of the imagination,’ but although the narrator is ‘dazzled,’ he is uneasy and feels a ‘bitter sense of shame.’ Hawthorne magnifies this feeling of shame through terms such as ‘costly self-indulgence’ and ‘redundance of personal ornament. . . .’”

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

1. Teachers should continue to help students move beyond single-word or single judgments on characters, issues, and situations. Sometimes, having students use templates for their responses can help train them to look for and think about complexities in characters. For example, teachers might require students to frame their initial observations about the narrator with the following templates:
 - “The narrator feels _____ about Zenobia, but also feels _____.”
 - “The narrator’s strongest emotion toward Zenobia is _____, but that is tempered by _____ and _____.”
 - “At the beginning the narrator feels _____ but by the end, the narrator feels _____.”Then students can be instructed to begin to assemble specific textual evidence to support their statements.
2. Teachers can require that specific textual evidence only be in the form of quoted words or phrases, instead of whole sentences (or more than sentences). This requirement could help the students to be more specific in quotation choices. At this point, it may become evident that some of the template sentences students originally created cannot be fully supported by textual evidence. Here is a chance for students to see how reasonable positions are built and how unreasonable ones can be revised or discarded.
3. Finally, teachers can help the students resolve the initial template sentences by asking questions about what conflicting, contradictory, or complex emotions within the narrator might mean or suggest overall. It should be noted that this idea of conflicting or contradictory or complex character building should be reinforced throughout the class in prose readings. Training the students to expect, anticipate, and identify complexity in characters can help them begin to recognize it in other life situations and points to the enduring understandings that literature can bring.

Question #3

Task: Open Analysis

Topic: The Gift

Max. Points: 9

Mean Score: 4.47

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

For Question 3, the “open” question, students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Many works of literature feature characters who have been given a literal or figurative gift. The gift may be an object, or it may be a quality such as uncommon beauty, significant social position, great mental or imaginative faculties, or extraordinary physical powers. Yet this gift is often also a burden or a handicap. Select a character from a novel, epic, or play who has been given a gift that is both an advantage and a problem. Then write a well-developed essay analyzing the complex nature of the gift and how the gift contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

Again, students were expected to complete three tasks successfully:

- They were to **select** an appropriate character from a literary work.
- They were to **analyze** the complex nature of the character’s gift and how that gift contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.
- They were to **write** a well-developed essay.

The three tasks are, of course, interdependent and are actually one unified task; selection leads to analysis leads to writing.

- **Selection** of an appropriate character in a literary work continues to be crucial to success in Question 3. While no work or genre of work is automatically deemed to be “unworthy” of Question 3, some works can be limiting for the students. Either the student chooses a work that is not sufficiently complex to support a well-developed essay, or the student chooses a work that is beyond that student’s ability to manage. The issue of text selection was addressed in the 2017 Chief Reader Report and that advice bears repeating: Selection of appropriate works should be an outgrowth of a student’s ability to read, identify, and understand complexity within a text and not simply the result of a list or single rule. Helping students make good selections — that is, helping them understand what the criteria and judgment guidelines should be for them individually — should be part of individualized instruction.
- The **analysis** task in Question 3 always has two parts. In this year’s prompt, students were, first, to analyze the complex nature of the gift itself. Then, they were asked to analyze how that gift affects the meaning of the work as a whole. That phrase, common in Question 3 prompts, points the students to making an assertion about a possible meaning and supporting that assertion with evidence. It should be noted that there was great latitude given to students in allowing them to choose the particular “gift.” Nearly anything that the students wanted to identify as a gift, if handled properly within the essay, qualified. The prompt this year encouraged students to engage with complexity by specifically asking for a gift with contradictory qualities. Still, some students chose to highlight only the positive or negative qualities of the gift. In referencing a “meaning of the work as a whole,” students sometimes lost the complexity that was suggested by the prompt and instead reached for an oversimplification or overstatement of meaning.
- **Writing** a well-developed essay means that students are asked to assemble evidence to support their defensible claim about the gift and its impact on the meaning of the work. Here, students needed to select plot details carefully and make sure that they used them to serve the central thesis in clearly connected and clearly explained ways.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Generally, students responded well to this question, as they have to Question 3 in past exams. This year, the diversity of texts is notable, with one reader cataloging nearly 300 different works discussed in essays over the course of the scoring week. This speaks to the breadth and diversity in AP literature classes and in the students' own reading. The question leader noted, "The broadness of the term 'gift' allowed for many choices of text; across a range of plays, epics, and novels (or, in a few cases, short stories, nonfiction, even films), students gravitated toward texts that offered them opportunities for layered discussion that unpacked the texts' deeper meanings. In doing so, students drew on a number of literary critical responses, typically by delivering a close reading of the text but in some cases also situating their argument within larger historical or cultural contexts." If students struggled with the skills required, they struggled most with assembling a clear analysis. Many students wrote only about the complex nature of the gift and did not fully articulate its function in the work as a whole; others wrote about the meaning of the work as a whole but failed to communicate the "advantage and the problem" of the gift. The mean score for this question was nearly equivalent to the mean score in 2017.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students simply noted good and bad qualities of a gift without synthesizing the list into a larger claim. (analysis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"The African-American narrator, symbolically unnamed for the entirety of the novel, introduces himself as an 'invisible man.' Yet, his invisibility is, rather than akin to that of a heroic archetype who spies on criminals with literal transparency, metaphorical in its nature. He claims to be 'invisible,' on the basis that his humanity, throughout his experience, is never seen. . . . Although the 'gift' of metaphorical invisibility, as shown through the novel's varied characters, can be utilized to (arguably) bolster freedom—freedom in terms of anonymity—Ellison, through the 'Invisible Man's' reflections, asserts that such invisibility is immensely impairing. . ."

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students had difficulty remembering their chosen text or finding appropriate reference points from the text to support their points. At times, this meant references to the text were vague or even incorrect. At other times, this meant students relied on too much plot summary. At other times, students failed to comment or connect their textual evidence to the argument. (selection) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A symbolic experience with buttered yams in Harlem outlines the confining nature of stereotype-driven invisibility.” • “While boarding the omnibus after her lunch with Miss Kilman, Elizabeth bemoans that people seem to always compare her to hyacinths, lilies, or other flowers. . . . Flowers are passive and immobile creatures, plucked and admired for their beauty, but lacking any other qualities. Thus, comparisons to flowers reduce Elizabeth to the single external quality of her beauty.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students oversimplified the meaning of the work as a whole or tried to force their idea of a gift into a stock theme. (analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In Ian McEwan’s <i>Atonement</i>, Briony has the gift of prolific writing at a young age, but when she begins to attempt to solve her own problems through writing happy endings, McEwan shows the reader that Briony’s attempt to play God is not only futile but also destructive, not at all telling of reality.” • “With such ideas in mind, Ellison implies that it takes an acceptance of one’s invisibility to feel fulfilled in a world of oppression. At the same time, however, it is vastly important to find one’s own approach to life, as clashing ideologies tend to worsen the dilemma [<i>sic</i>] (the college, the Brotherhood and Ras the Exhorter).”

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

1. Teachers should continue to incorporate diverse texts by diverse authors into their courses. Encountering diverse texts can help students see complexities and can help them move beyond “relatability” into reasoned claims. Teachers should remember that reading diverse texts does not have to conclude with an “everyone is alike under the surface” over-simplification. Instead, diversity can be an end unto itself, and recognizing differences and complexities in reading can be an objective.
2. Teachers should continue to help students create a list or “bank” of possible long form works to use in Question 3, but at least part (if not all) of that should be based upon the students’ individual abilities and interests. Teachers can also remind students that the list given with Question 3 is only a suggestion and should not be restrictive. Students are free to choose any long form work that they think fits the prompt and that they can handle in an essay. Tangentially, teachers should not see the lists in Question 3 (or composite lists assembled from past exams) as constituting an approved canon or prescriptive requirement.
3. Finally, teachers should resist the urge to tie every novel or play up in class with a simplistic moral or universal theme. Meanings of literary works are always complex and multiple, never simplistic and single. If I could sum up this idea in its own simplistic form, it would be: “Less theme; more thought.”