



Student Performance Q&A:

2002 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Reader regarding the 2002 free-response questions for AP English Literature and Composition. *They are intended to assist AP readers as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for the AP Exams.* They give an overview of each question and its performance, 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 included. Readers are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was intended by the question?

This question asked students to analyze an excerpt from Alain de Botton's novel *Kiss and Tell*. In the passage, the narrator, a young man in his early twenties, is attending a play with his new girlfriend Isabel when she unexpectedly discovers that her parents are also in the theater. The purpose of the question was to get students to read the text closely and to determine how the writer produced comic effect in his dramatic depiction of a scene they could recognize as humorous. (Test proctors reported that when the students read the passage they broke out in spontaneous laughter. Many students themselves reported this reaction in their essays.)

Although the passage amused its readers, its primary purpose on the exam was to get the students to think more deeply about how a writer creates humor. Yes, situations can be humorous in and for themselves, but to ask students to analyze how a writer goes about achieving a comic effect is to ask them to operate at a higher level of thinking. They must ask themselves why the passage is humorous and then make use of their analytical skills and their knowledge of literary techniques to explain effectively how the writer achieved a comic effect.

How well did students perform?

Most of the readers believed that the students responded well to the question. It was accessible to most students; they had something to say about the passage, and many brought in their own experiences with their parents to illustrate their points. The students certainly wrote more this year on the de Botton passage than did last year's students on the passage from Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Recognizing humor in the passage was of itself easy, but being able to identify the dramatic techniques used by the writer and then analyze how they produced a comic effect was more challenging. The more able students were prepared to distinguish between merely calling something humorous and analyzing how the writer produced the humor. Such students effectively analyzed how the writer achieved comic effect from the situation itself, from the thoughts of Isabel and her conversation with her parents, and from the relationship between daughter and parents. These students also understood how the narrative voice contributed to the

humor of the passage and wrote with flare about point of view. The less able students merely described the passage in terms of “isn’t this a funny situation” or wrote about the stereotypical relationships between children and their parents, using their own experiences as filler.

Most of the scores for Question 1 were at the mid-range. This question produced fewer lower half scores, more middle-range scores, and fewer top scores (9s and 8s) than the other two questions. In other words, most students had something to say about the passage, but many were not able to achieve the higher scores by recognizing the subtlety of how the writer produced the comic effect.

What were common errors or omissions?

Some readers felt that many students were not well equipped to address such a question since they had not been taught the theory of comedy and were thus at sea on how to approach the question. Others argued that the students were just not in tune with British humor and were thus misled in their analysis. I think that because the excerpt was so easy to understand, the students were lulled into thinking that the task posed by the question was an easy one. Comedy, however, is easy to recognize but difficult to analyze. Listing those parts of the excerpt they found funny or humorous was not the kind of thinking that led to a sophisticated analysis of the passage. Many, if not most of the students, do not have an understanding of the techniques that a writer uses to produce a comic effect in a particular scenario. The familiarity of the parent-child situation presented in the passage may also have led some students to write personal narratives that were seen as fillers rather than as analyses. And it just may be that students are not as well-trained to analyze comedy as they are to analyze other literary genres.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

The basic idea that I would like to stress to all teachers is that they must first of all train their students to be good writers. The students must demonstrate that they have control of language, that is, command of the grammar, mechanics, syntax, and the rhetorical features of language that are necessary to convince a reader that the content is clear, coherent, and persuasive. A poorly written essay cannot receive a score higher than a three on the nine-point scale. Secondly, I would hope that all AP teachers would make their students aware of the difference between analysis and paraphrase or mere plot summary. Make them conscious of the fact that summary is only valid when it is used in the service of analysis. Mere plot summary will earn for the student a score no higher than a four, and often an even lower score. Thirdly, I would hope that AP teachers would include in their curriculum the study of the nature and theory of comedy. Get students to read more analytically the comedies of Shakespeare, Shaw, Wilde, Stoppard, and others with a focus on how the comedy works. Provide the students with the various techniques that a playwright uses to produce a comic effect, for example. More to the point, give the students the language of the drama so that they can write at a higher level of analysis of that genre. It seems to me that the drama is one of the best genres to study for the purpose of developing the skills of close reading. Good writing, critical thinking, and close reading are necessary in preparing students to do well on the AP Examination in English Literature and Composition.

Question 2

What was intended by the question?

Students were asked to read carefully Thomas Hardy’s poem, “The Convergence of the Twain.” Then they were asked to take into consideration the title of the poem and analyze how the poetic devices convey the speaker’s attitude towards the sinking of the Titanic. The purpose of the

question was to test the students' critical skills of reading and interpreting poetry. To do well on this question, students had to have knowledge of the language of poetry and possess the ability to apply that understanding to an analytical interpretation of the poem. The general reference to "poetic devices" without mentioning any specifically was, of course, deliberate. The intent was to open up the response of the students and to allow them to choose the devices they thought most relevant. With an understanding of the title of the poem and a possession of an arsenal of critical poetic devices, students should have been prepared to analyze the speaker's attitude towards the loss of the Titanic.

How well did students perform?

The poetry question continues to be the most difficult task set before the students. The Hardy poem was, for the most part, accessible to the better students. (Some students, however, were not familiar with the term "Twain" and ran into obvious difficulties. The most glaring of all were those interpretations that assumed that "Twain" was a reference to the American humorist, Mark Twain, a mistake that led to strange and bewildering interpretations of the poem.) The more able students were able to use an appropriate critical vocabulary to point out Hardy's use of fate/destiny as an organizational structure within the poem, as well as his use of irony in depicting his attitude towards the fateful destiny of the Titanic.

The poetry question produced a greater spread of scores than the other two questions. Unlike Question 1, which had the fewest non-responses of the three, the poetry question had the most non-responses of all. This, however, is not uncharacteristic of student performances from past examinations. While the mean score of the prose question was 4.8, and that of the open question was 4.7, the mean score for the poetry question was 4.4. Students had somewhat more difficulty with this year's poetry question than with last year's, where their mean score was 4.9.

What were common errors or omissions?

Besides the inability of many of the students to comprehend the meaning of "Twain," there were those students who had difficulty with the very structure of the poem. Last year's students were working with a familiar form of poetry, the sonnet. This year's students were not. Yet the mere mention of "devices" in the prompt may have made them feel compelled to name Hardy's form, and they did, often to the readers' dismay. Students called his 11 tercets everything from a sonnet to a villanelle to a haiku. Whether the mention of "devices" in the prompt itself triggered this type of response is speculative. I suspect that the major problem that students had in analyzing Hardy's poem was staying on task. They were not well-equipped to deal with Hardy's subtleties, manifested in his diction and organization, and so instead of explaining his attitude, they inserted their own. I also believe that they missed Hardy's view of the fatefulness of the sinking of the Titanic because it was a view that was quite different from the one they perhaps had perceived from the recent movie. Too many students focused on moralistic and sentimental responses, possibly because of their acquaintance with the film, and were drawn away from the more analytical task required of them, namely to focus on the speaker's attitude toward the sinking of the ship.

Another common error that seemed to affect the quality of the students' interpretation was their listing of various "poetic devices" without analytical application. Also, students latched on to many of their favorite poetic devices, such as alliteration and personification, and applied them inappropriately to the analysis of the speaker's attitude.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

It is clear to me that more focus on the close reading of poetry is needed. The students need to learn how to move beyond just a memorization of the language of poetry. They need to develop analytical reading skills that bring a sophisticated understanding of the how and what of poetry. In other words, teachers need to stress not only “sound” (and other devices) but also to convey that the “sense” of the poem is prime. Making meaningful connections between the “how” of poetry and the “what” of poetry is crucial.

Students should also be taught to be discerning when selecting particular elements of poetry to be sure that they are appropriate tools of analysis for that particular poem. To write endlessly about cherished poetic devices and not add one iota to the advancement of knowledge about the poem’s meaning is a terrible waste of everyone’s time. Readers are not impressed with this type of writing and will not reward students who are only interested in flaunting their esoteric diction. Students should never lose sight of the fact that the poem is an entity unto itself. Even though many an AP poetry question asks students to analyze the poem by considering poetical devices, the abler students know that they cannot overlook the meaning of the poem, or in this year’s question, the attitude of the speaker, which of course drives its meaning.

Do not teach students to go through a poem stanza by stanza and instruct them to identify the various devices found there as though they were on a figurative language word search. Such an approach will not result in a coherent and effective reading of the poem.

I know this is an obvious injunction, but please tell your students to read the prompt very carefully. Many students, for whatever reason, read the poem superficially, or in haste, and gave their own personal responses without the slightest acknowledgement of the task prescribed. Tell your students that the scoring guide used by readers is geared to the specifics of the question asked. Ignoring the specifications of the question will only lower the students’ scores.

Students learn by doing. I would encourage AP teachers to engage their students in writing assignments that are not only critiqued for comprehension of the literary piece, but for the quality of the student’s writing itself. More and more readers commented to me that they believe that this present group of AP students is not as much in command of the standards of good writing as students in previous years.

Question 3

What was intended by the question?

This year’s open question asked students to write on morally ambiguous characters, that is, characters in literature whose behavior is neither purely evil nor purely good. They were asked to explain how the character may be viewed as morally ambiguous and why his or her moral ambiguity is significant to the work as a whole. They were also warned to avoid mere plot summary. The students then were asked to choose a work from a list provided, or to choose another novel or play of comparable literary merit.

The intent of the question was to require students to select an appropriate novel or play and allow them to demonstrate their critical thinking and writing skills in a very focused manner. The question asked them to demonstrate their abilities to read analytically, to write well, and to produce a persuasive and plausible interpretation of how a morally ambiguous character not only plays a pivotal role in the work, but also shapes its significance.

How well did students perform?

The question was a challenge to students and the more able students met that challenge and stayed on task. The less able students often ignored parts of the question, perhaps because they were unable to relate what they had to say about a character in a novel or play to the work as a whole. They may have been stumped as to what that phrase meant. Some of the readers suggested that instead of asking the students to relate their analysis of a morally ambiguous character to the work as a whole, the prompt should have asked them to relate it to a major theme of the work. The question was a good discriminator. It made the cut between ability levels quite clear, which may well have been due to the overt rhetorical situation presented by the prompt. This year's group of students responded as well to the open question as did last year's group, and, in fact, did slightly better. The question was, for the most part, certainly accessible to most students. The average mean of the scores for this year's open question was 4.6 compared to 4.5 last year. I think that the students did slightly better this year on the open question because the prompt was more direct in its specification of task. Last year's prompt asked students to perform a multitude of tasks, and students often ignored one or more of those tasks.

What were common errors or omissions?

A question on moral ambiguity is, of course, a challenging one in itself for young people. It is a rather complicated concept and requires some emotional and intellectual maturity from them. Having said that, I do believe, however, that AP students should be able to write cogently and think philosophically about issues of moral ambiguity as manifested in a literary work. The reference to "purely good and purely evil" may have led to some confusion on the part of the students, and may have resulted in an over-simplified treatment of the topic, namely, viewing characters as having "black and white" issues. Such a stance often led students to jarring absolutes that came across as glaring over-simplifications.

Many students were also confused about the word "significance." They could write about the nature of a character's moral ambiguity, but failed to deal with its significance to the work as a whole. Many, as I said above, ignored this part of the prompt. Whether they did so because of a hasty reading of the prompt or were just not comfortable dealing with the concept is debatable.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

I think it is most imperative, especially with the open question, that students read the prompt carefully and that they mentally register what is being asked of them. Failure to deal with all aspects of the question will lower their scores. Far too many students seem to have focused on the first part of the prompt and then totally ignored the second part.

More readers have commented on the lack of quality writing among this year's group of students. They commented upon the students' need for more training in grammar, their need to write in greater depth, and their need to be more academic and less chatty in their writing. Do tell students that their style of writing will affect their scores. It is important that students be reminded that when they make generalizations, they back them up with textual support. Far too many students failed to incorporate specific references of the text to support the points they wished to make. Most of the scoring guides make reference to the requirement that students make apt and specific references to the passages themselves. This is, of course, essential in the poetry and prose passage selections. In the open question, students should be able to back up their ideas with supporting evidence in the form of illustrations, examples, explanations, etc.

I think that those teachers who engage their students in writing essays that explore the richness of a literary text, encouraging them to go beyond the obvious or superficial, beyond the mere summary of plot, are definitely preparing their students to do well on the AP English and Literature Examination. The open question, of course, is the one kind of class assignment that can develop students into more perceptive readers, more analytical thinkers, who see beyond the surface and whose writing is itself a means of discovery.

I wish to commend all AP teachers for taking on the awesome task of preparing students for the AP Examination in English Literature and Composition. I know the importance of your work and as AP courses increase nationally, I hope that more of you become trainers of future AP teachers. If the program is to remain a high-quality program, it needs people like you who are willing to share your knowledge and teaching skills with those that follow you. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to AP English Literature and Composition.