



Student Performance Q&A:

2005 AP[®] English Literature and Composition

Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP[®] English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, James E. Barcus of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. 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?

Students were asked to read carefully two poems titled “The Chimney Sweeper,” written by William Blake, about the condition of chimney sweeps in the late eighteenth century: the first poem was from “Songs of Innocence” (1789) and the second from “Songs of Experience” (1794). They were then asked to write an essay in which they compared and contrasted the two poems, taking into consideration the poetic techniques Blake uses in each. The intent was to test students’ reading, analytical, and interpretative skills by presenting two challenging, rich poems. To answer the question successfully, students needed to have a firm grasp of the language and techniques employed by poets and then to arrive at an analytical and defensible reading of the essential meanings of both poems—a task that required a high level of critical thinking. The challenge of comparing and contrasting two Blake poems required the kind of thinking and writing common in the university literature classroom and served as a good discriminator of students’ abilities to read, comprehend, and write intelligently about complex and suggestive texts.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.67 out of a possible 9 points, slightly higher than the 4.59 mean score on the 2004 poetry question, which required students to compare and contrast two poems about darkness and light. Moreover, the mean score for question 1 was the highest mean score for any of the three questions on the 2005 exam, which suggests that teachers are devoting more time to the study of poetry.

Data show that more students earned scores of 9 and 8 this year on the poetry question than they have in some years. In fact, nearly as many received scores of 9 and 8 on the poetry question as they did on the “open” question (question 3), traditionally the question that elicits the best student essays. Perhaps because the 2003 and 2004 exams presented students with a similar task of comparing and contrasting two poems, teachers may have prepared their students better for such a comparison this year.

The question was sufficiently broad to support a variety of responses from students, providing interesting reading experiences for those scoring the exams. The best student readers, thinkers, and writers found the texts profoundly rich and complex, and they produced essays that often explored the social and historical implications of the text while concentrating on Blake’s poetic techniques. Most students found the poems accessible, and even moderately well-prepared students found much to say about them. Inevitably, the less-prepared students resorted to summary and paraphrase, struggling to find the appropriate language to discuss how the poems worked.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In spite of the high mean score for this question, exam Readers were troubled by the number of students who appeared to be untutored in close reading of poetic texts. Many students were not equipped to compose effective responses based upon an analysis of poetic techniques. In short, too many students could name such devices as rhyme scheme or simile but were unable to turn a list of techniques into an essay that showed how the devices contributed to the meaning of the poems. Readers noted the following problems.

- Students appeared to have memorized lists of devices, sometimes even esoteric and sophisticated terms, but were unable to integrate the lists into intelligent commentary.
- Students failed to support their generalizations with specific references to the texts.
- Students often emphasized form over content, providing meaningless introductions and repetitious conclusions.
- Students substituted summary or paraphrase for analysis.
- Students were unable to show how a technique they could identify (or sometimes misidentify) contributed to the meaning of the poem.
- Students were unable to speak to the ambiguity of these poems. Most students read the poems as discrete texts and showed little sense of the inherent irony that Blake intends readers to see.
- Students frequently used a simplistic organizational pattern, discussing first one poem and then the second, instead of organizing their essays by concepts or ideas that cut across both poems.

These observations suggest that students need to spend more class time engaged in reading, discussing, and analyzing poetry so that they become more skilled not only in understanding the mechanics of poetic language but also in connecting language to 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?

First and foremost, students must spend more time reading and analyzing literary language, both poetry and prose, for often the techniques are similar. Although students need to be introduced to the elements of poetic language, such as hyperbole, simile, and metaphor, these devices must be taught in context as techniques that contribute to meaning. Students often assert, for example, that the poet uses some rhythmic pattern like iambic tetrameter, but they are unable to analyze what this meter contributes to meaning or, more importantly, how the deviations from the basic pattern affect meaning. To improve their students' performance on the poetry question, AP English teachers should consider these suggestions.

- Develop comparable questions and require students to write frequently and under similar time constraints as those of the exam. Teachers could begin with other Blake poems like "The Lamb" and "The Tyger."
- Write responses to questions, a practice that allows teachers both to test the prompts they have written and to hone their own skills.
- Emphasize writing that integrates ideas into a coherent whole rather than producing discrete and isolated analyses.
- Insist that, in addition to recognizing literary techniques, students be able to explain how techniques are related to meaning.
- Teach close reading of poetic texts, beginning with basic issues like vocabulary and the use of a dictionary to illuminate possible meanings.
- Encourage students to read texts for their own personal pleasure.
- Develop poetry units that move from the more simple and accessible texts to the complex, from the less demanding to the more challenging.
- Teach texts from all literary periods and demonstrate that, although conventions may differ, certain techniques and genres have been used for a long time.
- Remind students to read the question carefully and to answer it fully.
- Teach students to integrate and embed their textual evidence into sentences and paragraphs and to avoid simplistic and bald assertions.
- Stress that mature thinking and writing recognize and explore the ambiguities and ironies that plague human existence. The concept of irony continues to elude students.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read the complete text of a short story, "Birthday Party," written in 1946 by Katharine Brush, and then to write an essay in which they explained how the author uses literary devices to achieve her purpose. The intent of the question was to test the students' abilities to read prose texts closely and to demonstrate their interpretative skills. The passage was unusually

accessible to most students, but the directness and explicitness of the passage did not challenge the best students to perform at the highest levels.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.32 out of a possible 9 points. The text was a straightforward but subtle account of a wife's attempt to make her husband's birthday a significant occasion. This question required students to pay close attention to small details and nuanced language and then to synthesize their observations into a coherent essay. In addition, the prompt used the blanket term "literary devices" rather than a list of specific literary terms. Thus the prompt provided less specific guidance about what literary devices the prose writer might use.

Paradoxically, another reason for the low mean score, the lowest on the 2005 exam, may have been the unusual accessibility of the passage. Students may, in fact, have been deluded by the apparent simplicity of the text and lulled into complacency. Certainly, fewer well-prepared students earned scores of 9 or 8 and more less-prepared students fell into the bottom half of the scoring range. Thus, among the three questions, the prose passage may have been the least effective discriminator in spite of the story's accessibility. Many students fell into simple paraphrase and summary, ignoring the prompt's explicit requirement to analyze literary devices.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common student errors or omissions for this question were frequently similar to those on the poetry question and perhaps reflect the trend in American society to read less and to write in some form of shorthand like that used for text messages. AP English teachers must resist these trends and stress to their students that brief assertions cannot substitute for in-depth and intelligent analysis. Readers noted the following problems.

- Students relied too much on paraphrase and summary and did not incorporate their statements into an analytic argument.
- Many students were not familiar with the literary devices a prose writer uses, and they struggled to identify options.
- Students underestimated the passage, assuming that directness and simplicity implied lack of subtlety.
- Even many of those students who were aware of devices like point of view, narrative voice, and narrative pace slipped into a laundry list of devices and were unable to show how the devices contributed to the author's purpose.
- Students failed to support their assertions with apt, skillfully integrated references to the text itself.
- Many students continued to struggle with the concept of the essay as a coherent whole. Instead, they depended on a mechanical organizational pattern like the five-paragraph essay, producing strained and lengthy introductions that did not contribute much to the essay and conclusions that were repetitious.
- Students showed little understanding of the organic development of the body of an essay. That is, they were unable to use the evidence they found in the text to support a position that evolves and is internally consistent.

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?

Teachers should inspire students to read and read and read, and require them to write and write and write. Unfortunately, many teachers are under pressure to teach to state testing requirements that may be antithetical to skills that are central to the AP experience. However, it is recommended that teachers attempt the following strategies.

- Require students to read a variety of prose styles from a wide range of periods like Renaissance Classically inspired rhetoric (Bacon), eighteenth-century satire (Swift), and twentieth-century fiction (Atwood).
- Emphasize that many literary devices, such as alliteration, simile, and point of view, are used by both poetry and prose writers.
- Give students practice in determining the difference between paraphrase and analysis.
- Teach students to embed their specific evidence from the text into their sentences and paragraphs rather than to merely list the support for their arguments.
- Model argumentation and analysis for students, perhaps also writing under the same time constraints that students are under.
- Remind students that the questions used on previous AP Exams do not necessarily predict current exam content. That is, just because humor or satire appeared on one exam does not mean it will appear the next year.
- Teach students to read questions carefully and not to come to the exam with preconceptions about them. For example, one exam may provide a list of suggested devices while another exam may not. One exam may require students to discuss social commentary, but another exam may emphasize character development. Questions evolve from the passages and are written to open up discussion, not to provide closure.
- Require students to write frequently and to produce essays—complete essays—that develop organic organizational patterns that are appropriate to the passage and the prompt. Urge students to move beyond mechanical structures that do not illuminate the argument.
- Help students see, understand, and articulate how good writing explores uncertainties and ambiguities. To achieve this end, provide students with numerous examples of prose that contain ambivalent—perhaps even contradictory or antithetical—positions that are held in intelligent suspension.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The prompt for question 3, the “open” question, began with a quotation from Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* (1899), in which the protagonist Edna Pontellier is said to possess “that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions.” Students were then asked to identify in a novel or play that they had studied a character who conforms outwardly while questioning inwardly and to analyze how this tension between outward conformity and inward questioning contributes to the meaning of the work. Because AP students read a variety of texts with

characters who struggle with the complexities of human existence, they had ample titles to choose from and were not forced to distort less appropriate texts to fit the prompt.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.43 out of a possible 9 points. Students performed well on this question. Although the mean score for question 3 was lower than the mean score for question 1, more students earned scores of 9 or 8 on question 3 than they did on question 1. Furthermore approximately 30 percent of the students earned scores of 3 or below on question 3 compared to approximately 21 percent on question 1 and nearly 29 percent on question 2. The data support the contention that question 3 continues to be a good discriminator and to elicit strong responses from the best students.

Readers found that students responded positively to the admonition to draw on material they had studied. Moreover, most students understood that the prompt required the tension between outward conformity and inward questioning to be the crux of their discussion. Thus, the inherent tension in the character helped students to organize their ideas and extend the discussion to a consideration of the meaning of the work.

Once again, Readers found that too many students depended on summary and paraphrase instead of analysis. Although the 2005 prompt did not require some of the higher-level critical thinking the 2004 prompt demanded, and the 2005 prompt permitted students to emphasize character development and its relationship to the meaning of the work as a whole, in 2005 more students earned scores of 3 or below than did students in 2004.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Unfortunately the list of student errors or omissions for the open question does not change significantly from year to year. Nevertheless, the deficiencies are worth reporting again.

- Students continued to substitute summary and paraphrase for detailed analysis. Because the prompt spoke to characterization, Readers may have seen fewer plot summaries than they have in other years, but students often wrote in such generalities that Readers were uncertain the students had actually studied the work they were writing about.
- Students sometimes chose texts they had studied but which were not appropriate to the prompt. Teachers should admonish students to think before they begin to write.
- Students sometimes chose texts they had not read recently and thus recalled only dimly.
- Students often could not remember the names of key characters or even the authors of the books they were writing about.
- Although students are encouraged to think beyond the list of titles appended to the prompt, they should be certain that their choices represent works of “equal literary merit.” Students have difficulty convincing Readers that juvenile fiction, dogmatic and propagandistic writing, popular religious fiction, and drugstore novels will stand the test of time.
- Students often wasted time and energy by repeating the question before they launched into their discussion. Although this practice may function as a prewriting exercise, the prompt asks for an essay and for students to demonstrate critical thinking and sophisticated writing. Repeating the prompt does not demonstrate higher-level competency.

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?

Ultimately, the AP English teacher can only open the door to learning and cannot be held finally responsible for the performance of students if they choose not to take advantage of the AP course. Unfortunately, in the present educational climate, learning for the sake of learning, reading for delight and profit, and writing for the sake of intellectual clarification receive less and less public support. Because students often wonder what the reason is for the kind of intellectual tasks called for in the AP English Literature and Composition Exam, teachers would do well to show their students how central reading and writing are to the stability of our democratic institutions. If students are unable to control and manage language, even manipulate it, then they will be controlled and manipulated by people who use language for their own purposes. If teachers can capture their students' attention, convincing them that being able to read critically and to write analytically are not just classroom or aesthetic activities but also relevant tasks that are essential to our form of government, then they may have more receptive audiences.

- Reiterate again and again that the choice of a title may determine the score a student receives. Titles of little literary merit do not help a student score well, even though the book may have significant meaning to the student.
- Stress the importance of being familiar with the details of plot and character. The inability to remember characters' names, the sequence of events, or the crux of an action suggests an unfamiliarity that works against the effectiveness of an essay.
- Encourage students not to depend upon film versions of a book or play for the details of their analyses. If films are introduced in classes, teachers should explicitly show how the film adapts or sometimes misuses or distorts the primary text.
- Require students to pay as much attention to prose texts as they do to poetry. Although literature teachers sometimes act as though close reading is a technique intended primarily for the study of poetry, in fact all literature, including novels and plays of significant literary merit, responds to close attention to language, style, and nuances of vocabulary, as well as character analysis and plot. Steinbeck and Shakespeare, Williams and Faulkner demand that readers pause and consider images, rhythms, and diction.
- Convey to students that generalizations without detailed support, and paraphrase without analysis, are serious flaws in an essay. Repeating the same idea three times with no significant new information does not strengthen an essay.
- Advise students to think in terms of an essay, not a string of sentences, not a list of terms, not a tangled web of unconnected details. Essays should contain an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, and the organizational pattern should grow organically from the detailed analysis that precedes the writing.