



Student Performance Q&A:
2008 AP[®] English Literature and Composition
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 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 sonnets, Keats's "When I Have Fears" and Longfellow's "Mezzo Cammin," and then to write a well-organized essay in which they compared and contrasted how the two poets employed poetic techniques to explore their particular situations. In this essay, students were expected to analyze how poets use the resources of the English language to achieve their aims. The intent of this question was to assess students' abilities to read closely and to pay attention to details in the text, noting similarities and differences in the poets' representations of their situations. To respond to the question successfully, students needed to have a firm grasp of the devices and techniques employed by poets and then to arrive at an analytical and defensible reading of how these devices were used in the poems.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for responses to this prompt was 4.44 out of a possible 9 points, slightly below the mean of 4.57 in 2007 and the mean of 4.67 in 2005 but slightly above the mean of 4.27 in 2006. The prompt discriminated very well. Better responses compared and contrasted the sonnet forms as employed by Keats and Longfellow and dealt reasonably well with how the Shakespearean sonnet form served Keats's purpose and how the Petrarchan form seemed more suitable to Longfellow's. Upper-half essays concentrated on the various images and discussed insightfully how these images worked together to convey the poets' situations. These responses often attempted to

analyze tone from a comparative standpoint, sometimes differing in whether Keats or Longfellow was more pessimistic or optimistic; but in either case, the better essays supported their claims with appropriate detail.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As the mean scores from 2005 through 2008 indicate, Readers have not found appreciable improvements in the ability of students to read and explicate poetic texts. Many students have difficulty analyzing figurative language. In fact, many students have difficulty reading any complex use of language. Too many students do not possess the vocabulary and do not understand the various nuances of language to be able to read imaginative literature. Also, many students are not equipped to compose effective responses that employ an analysis of poetic techniques.

Those who create the exam constantly wrestle with the issue of whether to provide a list of suggested techniques. They intentionally did not provide such a list in 2008 in an attempt to draw students away from a formulaic and automatic organizational pattern. As a result, students resorted to the devices they were familiar with, such as rhyme and meter, whether the devices were significant or not. And frequently students failed to connect the devices to a discussion of meaning. Too many students supplied a laundry list of poetic devices, whether they appeared in the poems or not, and proceeded to discuss them in the most superficial terms. Some students tried to be clever and cite the use of obscure devices—Readers were not impressed. Too many students resorted to assertions that a technique exists (e.g., “The poet uses diction”) but were unable to turn a list of techniques into an essay that showed *how* the devices contribute to the meaning of the poem. To the consternation of Readers, the same problems appear year after year:

- Students struggle to formulate an umbrella thesis about how poetic devices create meaning.
- Students fail to support their generalizations with specific references to the texts.
- Students produce mechanically organized essays, meaningless introductions (often duplicating the prompt), and repetitious conclusions. The safety net of the five-paragraph essay seldom rescues them.
- Students reproduce memorized lists of devices or techniques, sometimes even esoteric and sophisticated terms, but are unable to integrate the lists into intelligent commentary.
- Students fail to analyze—they substitute paraphrase or summary for analysis.
- Students do not move from *what* to *how* and *why*. They are satisfied if they identify an element, and they do not move to higher-level thinking.
- Students struggle to distinguish between literal and figurative uses of language.

The habit of close reading (sometimes known as New Criticism) has not been developed in many students. After fifty years of the AP emphasis on close reading, students still do not show much improvement. Rather than becoming more adept at reading complex texts, they seem to be reducing poetic texts to the sound bites with which they have become more and more familiar as TV and other technical devices have become ubiquitous.

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?

The teaching of poetry is a challenging exercise. Reading the 2008 responses might lead one to believe that AP teachers introduce very little complex poetry into the classroom. Students at all levels resist the mind-stretching practices of examining denotations, connotations, contexts, and syntactical relationships. Habits generated by a consumer-oriented society, including a multitude of distractions and obligations, militate against the thoughtful reading and analysis of texts. As a result, students seem to believe there are shortcuts to analysis, such as are common to text messaging. They must be disabused of the notion that memorized commands will produce good essays on demand. Teachers should stop teaching a laundry list of poetic terms. Rather, the devices and terms should emerge from texts, and class discussion should emphasize how techniques work within that particular text. Teachers should demand that students move from *what* to *how* and *why*. Forcing students to think inductively rather than deductively might be helpful. Specifically, teachers should:

- Teach students to read the prompt carefully and to respond to all of the elements of the prompt.
- Remind students that although they must address the prompt, they have ample opportunity to think creatively and imaginatively. A prompt is merely a prompt, not a formula to be followed slavishly.
- Teach students to integrate and embed textual evidence in the sentences and paragraphs of their essays and to avoid simplistic and bald assertions.
- Encourage students to read slowly and to enjoy the rich ambiguities and complexities of the English language. In some cases teaching fewer examples and texts may lead to better reading.
- Teach students that memorizing the name of a technique or being able to identify a technique is only the first step in analysis. The final step is to explain *how* a technique contributes to meaning.
- Emphasize that an essay should integrate ideas into a coherent whole rather than produce a list of discrete and isolated assertions or statements.
- Write essays along with your students, using comparable prompts, and share your responses with them. Teachers who cannot write well to a prompt probably cannot teach students to write well.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully an accessible excerpt from Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) and then, in a well-organized essay, to analyze how Desai uses such literary devices as speech and point of view to characterize the experience of an Indian exchange student, Arun. In the excerpt, Arun joins members of his American host family for an afternoon at the beach. The intent of this question was to assess students' abilities to read closely and to interpret the author's use of literary devices to create a complex and nuanced representation of Arun's experience. To respond to the question successfully, students needed to connect detail to larger meaning and to show how particular devices combine to characterize Arun's experience.

How well did students perform on this question?

In 2008 students performed least well on this prompt. The mean score of 3.93 out of a possible 9 points was the lowest of this year's three free-response questions and lower than the 4.45 mean for question 2 in 2007. In 2006 the mean score for this prompt was 4.59, but the 2005 mean was 4.32. In short, the 2008 prompt produced the lowest mean score for this question in four years. Some years the passage has been complex, allowing for soaring responses by well-prepared students. Other years more accessible passages have led to more mundane responses. The Desai passage was multilayered, allowing less-able students to respond at some level but encouraging better students to plumb the depths. Readers found that students who had been trained to read well wrote better essays than those who read simplistically or were accustomed to skimming.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students took a formulaic approach to answering the prompt, listing literary devices and providing examples from the passage. This approach sometimes indicated good reading and thinking skills but more often yielded superficial understanding. Other students speculated beyond the text, providing their own (limited or fantastical) interpretations. Stronger essays included good analyses of how meaning is constructed by language, and the students' understanding of meaning or what actually is conveyed in the passage about the boy's experience was more sophisticated and thoughtful.

Poorly developed ideas, a lack of quotation or other references to the text, and problems with defining and applying literary techniques led many students to struggle with the task. Too many students echoed the prompt as a thesis for their essays. The best essays developed a thesis that grew out of close reading of the text and used insights about Arun's reactions to his host family and to the natural environment to explore specifically what Arun's experience is. Because the language of the passage did not require an awareness of historical context or linguistic differences, problems endemic to writing about pre-twentieth-century prose did not emerge. However, Readers noted such generic problems as these:

- Students struggled with the concept of the essay as a coherent whole. They relied on a mechanical organizational pattern to produce five disconnected paragraphs, apparently unaware that an essay ought to build an argument with each point dependent upon the previous paragraph.

- Students lacked formal training in the application of key terms germane to literary analysis. Even when they were able to define the terms, often they merely asserted that the author uses “strong diction.” Students had difficulty moving from noting the presence of a technique to discussing *how* the technique contributes 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?

Teach students to *read*. Close reading skills were woefully lacking in the low- to mid-range scores. The passage contained many subtle and not-so-subtle verbal clues that conveyed a rich and intriguing description of Arun’s experience in a new culture, but many students saw only the simple and superficial. Even students who could write an organized essay often only listed literary devices with examples. These students were reluctant or unable to provide sensitive, insightful commentary on what the narrative was attempting to convey in all of its complexity. Students need to be taught to be thoughtful and perhaps more discursive about what a passage is suggesting, without speculating or imposing their own meanings onto the passage.

- Students need a vocabulary for addressing the key elements of literary analysis, but they also need practice applying the devices, moving from the appearance of the devices in the passage to a discussion of their impact on meaning.
- Students must be taught the difference between paraphrase or summary and analysis. They have difficulty turning their observations into an argument.
- Students, in addition to being familiar with the specialized vocabulary of literary analysis, need to enlarge their word bank, not employing exotic words or terms for their own sakes but choosing the exact word to express a precise thought.
- Students should practice reading and writing about complex contemporary prose. They should be reminded that accessible passages are not automatically easier to discuss than passages of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century prose.
- Students should be taught to read the prompt carefully and not bring to their examination of the prompt any preconceptions about how to proceed as they write their essays. One question may provide a familiar list of techniques while another may not. One question may ask students to discuss social commentary, another may emphasize character development, and a third may focus on a character’s experience. Prompts evolve from passages and are written to stimulate and open up discussion, not provide closure. Students should practice writing about a variety of passages and be taught to shape an essay that evolves out of the prompt and the passage.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The prompt for question 3, the “open” question, began by noting that in literary works, a minor character, often known as a foil, possesses traits that emphasize, by contrast or comparison, the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the main character. The prompt added that the ideas or behavior of the minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character. Students were then asked to choose a novel or play in which a minor character serves as a foil to a main character and to write an essay analyzing how the relation between the minor character and the major character illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.

The aim of this prompt was to assess students’ abilities to move beyond paraphrase or summary, which focuses on description of events in the text, to comparative analysis of the foil and the major character as a way of understanding the larger significance of the work. To respond to the question successfully, students needed to write an effective and well-organized essay that grounded persuasive analysis of the meaning of the work in a detailed character analysis.

How well did students perform on this question?

As in past years, students performed better on this question than on the other two. The prompt generated a wide range of scores, enabling Readers to discriminate among essays. The 2008 mean score of 4.80 out of a possible 9 points was the highest of the three free-response questions, comparable to the 2007 mean of 4.84 and considerably higher than the 2006 mean of 4.50 or the 2005 mean of 4.43.

The emphasis on character, defined in comparison or contrast to a foil, helped students to reach for analysis and to deemphasize plot summary. Upper-level scores reflected essays that perceptively analyzed the relationship between characters, showing how a foil reveals the distinctive characteristics and qualities of a main character. Lower-level scores reflected essays that failed to develop an argument about the relationship between a foil and a main character. Mid-range essays, as usual, attended to the *what* (what happens to each character) with at least some of the *why* (what characteristics the foil reveals in the main character and how their connection contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole). Most students found the question accessible and were able to identify paired main and foil characters.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many of the student errors or omissions are recurrent from year to year and are common to all three free-response prompts. However, because the exam does not work from a prescribed curriculum or provide a common passage for discussion, some issues are also prompt specific:

- Students did not discriminate between description of events or behaviors and analysis of character traits. Some students appeared to assume that their audience did not know the novel or play, and thus they shifted their focus away from a character analysis that would answer the prompt to a chronological summary of events. In some cases they neglected the prompt and failed to consider why the details they described matter.

- Students did not attend to the prompt’s request to discuss the relationship between the main and foil characters and the meaning of the work as a whole. They had difficulty addressing the work’s meaning and explaining how the work’s characters contribute to its meaning.
- Students had difficulty with the concept of an essay. They depended upon a five-paragraph template or upon preconceived notions about a novel or play. The idea that an essay evolves organically from the prompt and the student’s knowledge of the work as a whole seemed to escape many of them.
- Students sometimes chose texts they had studied that were not appropriate for the prompt. Inevitably, students choose a familiar text, but the choice of an inappropriate text leads to a mediocre essay.
- Students were too dependent on a short list of texts (e.g., *Hamlet*, *Huckleberry Finn*). Students frequently substituted summary and paraphrase for detailed analysis. The need for analysis cannot be overstated.
- Students sometimes depended on cinematic versions of texts rather than texts they have read. Such essays inevitably revealed the shortcut that had been taken and were scored accordingly.
- Students failed to integrate evidence into their sentences and paragraphs or even failed to provide any specific evidence at all. Sometimes students wrote in such generalities that Readers were uncertain which texts were under discussion.
- Students did not have a working knowledge of the terms necessary for literary analysis.
- Students often wasted time and energy by repeating the prompt before they launched into their discussions. Although this practice may function well as a prewriting exercise, the prompt asks students to write an essay and to demonstrate critical thinking and sophisticated writing. Repeating the prompt does not demonstrate higher-level competence.
- Students are encouraged to think beyond the list of titles appended to the prompt, but they should be certain their choices represent works of “equal literary merit.” Students have difficulty convincing Readers that juvenile fiction, dogmatic and propagandistic writing (including most popular religious fiction), and drugstore novels will stand the test of time.

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?

This prompt required analysis of the relationship between character traits, consideration of similarities and differences, and exploration of how the pairing of main and foil characters helps establish the meaning of the work. Based on the strengths and weaknesses in student responses, AP teachers should consider the following suggestions:

- Teach students to distinguish summary or description from analysis. Teach them to connect detail they cite from the text to a larger analytical argument that answers the prompt, to write for an audience that is familiar with the text, and to focus their essays on the issues raised by the prompt rather than on a description of the novel or play.
- Teach students to write about the meaning of works as a whole and to identify the relation of parts (e.g., characters, techniques, or episodes) to the meaning of the work. Give them practice in developing arguments about the relationship of some part of a work to the work's overall meaning.
- Remind students that generalizations without detailed support and paraphrase without analysis are serious flaws in an essay. Repeating the same idea three times without providing additional information does not strengthen an essay.
- Urge students not to depend on film versions of a book or play for the details of their analyses. If films are introduced in class, teachers should show explicitly how the film adapts or frequently misuses or distorts the primary text. Films should not be used as substitutes for literary analysis.
- Stress that students must be familiar with the details of plot and character in a work. The inability to remember characters' names or a sequence of events or the crux of an action suggests an unfamiliarity with the text that will work against the effectiveness of an essay.
- Encourage the use of specifics from the text, embedding the evidence in sentences and paragraphs.
- Teach a spectrum of texts from classical and English literature. Reading lists seem to concentrate on the same five or six titles.
- Emphasize again and again that the initial choice of a text may affect significantly the score an essay receives. Titles of little literary merit or titles that do not fit the prompt will not help a student write an essay that earns a high score, regardless of the significance of the text to the individual student.
- Encourage students to write essays that have introductions, middles, and conclusions. Although there is no inherent bias against the five-paragraph essay, student essays that enumerate mechanically pale in comparison with the essay that evolves organically from the prompt and the passage.