



Student Performance Q&A:

2010 AP® English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2010 free-response questions for AP® English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Susan Strehle of Binghamton University, the State University of New York at Binghamton. 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?

This question asked students to read carefully a poem by Marilyn Nelson Waniek entitled “The Century Quilt” and to write an essay analyzing how Waniek employs literary techniques to develop the complex meanings attributed by the speaker to the quilt. The prompt mentioned structure, imagery, and tone as examples of the poet’s techniques.

With its phrasing, the question was intended to lead students to consider complexities in the quilt’s meanings for the speaker. Although a bedcovering may generally be regarded as warm and comforting, the prompt urged students to find other dimensions of meaning: the speaker’s identity as shaped and expressed in a family of multiple colors; the power of the past, of imagination, and of dreams to create the future; and the links among generations. The prompt asked students to consider how the poet creates these multiple meanings through the use of literary elements, intending to test their abilities to articulate the connections between technique and meaning.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.33 out of a possible 9 points. This reflects a small decline from the previous year, when the mean score for the poetry question was 4.37, and a further decline from 2008, when the mean was 4.44. This year’s mean score was slightly higher than the lowest mean score in recent years, 4.27 in 2006. The highest mean score in recent years was 4.67 in 2005; mean scores have been consistently lower in the intervening five years.

The prompt discriminated well, allowing AP Exam Readers to identify student essays at every level. Responses that earned scores in the upper half of the score range were distinguished by their insights into the meanings of the quilt and the connections with her family history that it symbolizes for the speaker. Such essays often articulated comparisons and contrasts among the Indian blanket, the “army green” and the Century Quilt. Using appropriate examples and

quotations from the poem, they offered substantial interpretations of at least one and often two or three meanings of the quilt, connecting it with memories of the past, dreams both past and present, and the related patchwork quilt of the speaker's family. Essays that earned scores in the lower half of the score range tended to avoid the complexity of the poem, understanding its theme on a simply positive register as an expression of childhood happiness. They often summarized or described the poem, using quotations in support of paraphrase rather than interpretation.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common student error in approaching this accessible poem was to substitute superficial description of its contents for analysis of its meanings. Weaker student writers saw one dimension of the speaker's relation to the quilt and missed the complexity in the poem's representation of her family and its history. In writing about the quilt, they tended to fall into easy generalities about warm blankets, reflecting in some cases on their own childhood favorites, and supported these general assertions by truisms and clichés rather than evidence from the poem.

Another common error was to use the list of literary elements in the prompt (structure, imagery, tone) as a focus and organizational principle for essays that did not consider the meanings of the quilt for the speaker. The structure students found in the poem sometimes moved from the past in stanza one to the future in stanza three without analyzing the complicated interrelationships among the time frames in the poem. Discussions of tone in the poem were often marred by a lack of nuanced vocabulary; the tone was described as "happy" or "content[ed]."

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?

Close readings of poetry are a vital way to prepare students for the analysis of challenging texts that may not yield easily to understanding. Because the language and structure of poetry foreground literary artistry, students have the opportunity to exercise their ability to read and write with close attention to both meaning and literary technique. This year's poetry question suggests that students are better prepared to identify techniques than they are to analyze and articulate meanings, even in an accessible poem. The following suggestions may be helpful in this regard:

- Teach students to write articulate statements of the meanings of poems. Combine discussions of well-known poems with assignments requiring students to identify meanings in a poem they have not seen. Ask students to identify complexities in those meanings, or ways in which elements of the poem come into productive conflict with each other.
- Teach students to distinguish descriptive summary of what is in a poem from analysis of its meanings. Recognizing that meanings are often plural in the most complex poems, give students practice in grappling with ways to articulate one or more meanings. Help them develop a vocabulary for the poem's reflections on profound issues.
- When teaching students to identify the literary devices that give poetry its unique power, give priority to the connections between these techniques and the poem's meanings.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully a passage from Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda* (1801) and to write an essay analyzing Clarence Hervey's complex character. The prompt noted that

Edgeworth develops the character through such literary techniques as tone, point of view, and language. This question was intended to assess students' abilities to read closely, with attention to language and selection of detail, and to sort out elements of a self-contradictory, complex character. At the same time, the question was intended to assess students' abilities to write an effective essay — one with a governing central idea about Hervey's complex character, organized in coherent units of analysis and supported with appropriate use of evidence from the passage.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.14 out of a possible 9 points. This was the second lowest mean score for the prose question in five years: in 2008 the mean score was 3.93. Other mean scores for this type of question have been higher: in 2005 the mean score was 4.32; in 2006 it was 4.59; in 2007 it was 4.45; in 2009 it was 4.46. Some students found the language of the passage challenging or difficult; for some it was "esoteric." Weaker writers described Hervey's character, following the passage with annotations of particular details, rather than analyzing it. The richness of detail and nuanced language in the passage enabled stronger writers to develop sophisticated interpretations of Hervey's character, finding paradoxical contradictions between his insecurity and his pretensions or between his concern for appearances and his "terror" over being attracted to Belinda in the face of what he sees as *her* concern for appearances. The passage enabled Readers to make clear discriminations among essays at each score point.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was to simplify the complexities of Hervey's character. Weaker writers often framed arguments that represented Hervey in one dimension; he was seen as either an entirely negative figure or, less frequently, an entirely positive one. Between the length of the passage, its syntax, and its use of diction expressing the period in which it was written, weaker writers found themselves paraphrasing Edgeworth at some length before (and sometimes without) framing an interpretation of what the prompt had clearly identified as the character's complexity. The meaning of "vicious" as "given to or overtaken by vices" was not available to some writers, who assumed the narrator was, in a more modern sense, depraved. Many students did not adequately consider the relationships between Hervey and Lord and Lady Delacour or Belinda and thus missed some of the pointed contradictions in his character.

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 prose passage was difficult for students in part because of its 1801 diction and syntax. More students chose not to answer this question than the poetry question, seemingly because of difficulty in reading the passage. While all AP classes include works, both poetry and prose, from varied periods and genres, student responses to this question suggest that teachers could help their students by spending more time with prose works from earlier periods. In addition, some general rules apply:

- The analysis of character is important to literary analysis. Give students practice analyzing passages in which a character, major or minor, has a complex and divided set of characteristics. Have students explore the meaning of contradictory details in the representation of a complex character.
- The analysis of tone and point of view requires a sophisticated understanding of the potential contributions of the kind of irony displayed in this passage. Indeed, the ability to perceive irony and to analyze its implications for the representation of character may be one of the most important features distinguishing an essay that earns a score in the upper

half of the score range. Teachers should work with irony, emphasizing its ability to create complicated assertions that both are and are not true.

- Omniscience has many uses and implications: This narrator offers a complex example of an “all-knowing” speaker who sees both inside and out, and who represents Hervey as he sees himself. Spend time with the potential variations on point of view and their implications for the representation of character. Students who can discuss point of view with confidence can often make strong arguments about passages.
- Encourage students to prewrite before they begin to answer the question. Responses that dive in, in an effort to produce a long reading, often begin by describing the contents of the passage and only work their way toward an interpretive argument as they end. A better strategy is to make notes, arrive at an interpretation that takes account of the entire passage, and then write the essay.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The prompt for the “open” question began by quoting Edward Said on the subject of exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” yet also potentially “a potent, even enriching” experience. Students were asked to select a novel, play, or epic in which a character experiences such a rift, to write an essay analyzing how the character’s experience with exile is both alienating and enriching, and to analyze how the experience illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.

This question was intended to assess students’ abilities to analyze a character who has experienced a significant change: one between a “home” place, however that was defined, and an “other” place. To respond successfully, students needed to select an appropriate character and define that character’s exile, to discuss aspects of exile that were alienating and those that were enriching, and to show how the experience of exile shaped or clarified the meaning of the work as a whole. They needed to connect the analysis of a displaced character to the meanings of the text, linking displacement to multivalent changes in the character and those changes to the text’s larger themes.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.49 out of a possible score of 9 points. As in previous years, students performed better on this type of question than they did on the other two free-response questions, often selecting a literary text they knew well and could write about with assurance. The mean score for this question was low, however, relative to the mean scores on other questions of this type in the past five years. The only year in which a lower mean score emerged was 2005, when the mean was 4.43. Subsequent years produced higher mean scores: 4.50 in 2006, 4.84 in 2007, 4.80 in 2008, and 4.82 in 2009. The prompt generated a wide range of scores, allowing Readers to discriminate among essays at all score points.

Essays that earned scores in the upper half of the score range typically selected characters who had experienced meaningful exiles, while weaker responses chose characters whose “exile” was metaphoric, like David Lurie’s exile from his job in *Disgrace*. The best responses linked the experience of exile successfully and persuasively to the meaning of the work as a whole, moving from specific analysis of place and displacement to an interpretation of the importance of exile in the themes of the work. Essays that scored in the upper half of the score range were also well

organized, confidently written, and effectively argued with the support of telling details from the text.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The prompt asked students to consider the experience of exile as both alienating and enriching, as the quotation from Edward Said suggested; in designing this prompt, the AP English Literature and Composition Development Committee hoped to encourage students to perceive a “both/and” complexity in their chosen text. A common error in essays that earned scores in the lower half of the score range, however, was to develop only one side of the experience; some students saw Oedipus, for example, as suffering only alienation, while others saw Odysseus as enriched by his encounters on the journey home and Crusoe enriched by his self-reliance. Addressing only one aspect of a complex experience, such essays tended to simplify the meaning and to disregard the richness of the texts as a whole.

As always, the other common error in student responses to the open question was to summarize the plot. Many essays began with a description of the character’s exile: how it came about, what events triggered it, where the character went during exile. Some of these essays moved from plot summary toward a statement about how the exile alienated or enriched, but they rarely related exile to the meaning of the work as a whole. Weaker writers also substituted general descriptions for specific interpretation or unconvincing character portrayal full of truisms and clichés for analysis of a character’s complexity. These essays tended to be poorly organized, conversational in their language, and thin in their development.

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?

AP teachers emphasize to students that they need to address the prompt specifically and directly, keeping its terms in the foreground of their essays. Under exam pressure, some students disregard this crucial advice, especially in their responses to the open question. Some successful responses to this question approached it with substantial analysis of various ways in which the character’s exile was alienating, then a detailed and specific analysis of ways in which this same character was enriched by the experience of exile, and finally an interpretation of how this double-sided experience of exile expressed meanings central to the work as a whole. To help students succeed in their responses to this type of question, teachers should consider doing the following:

- Give students practice developing an organizational structure for their essays out of the terms and concepts in the prompt. Encourage them to prewrite on the specific issues raised by the prompt before they begin an essay. Ask them to develop an argument that answers the question before they begin and to write this argument as their first sentence.
- Teach students to articulate the meaning of the work as a whole. Students who have an argument about the meanings of the text they choose to write about can develop better analysis of the text in relation to any prompt. They can also relate literary technique to meaning in more satisfying ways, interpreting character or setting, for example, as a deliberately designed expression of the author’s literary meaning.
- Encourage students to review the range of texts they have studied and to choose carefully when they see the prompt for the open question. The choice of a text — and within it, this year, a character — that suits the prompt particularly well can lead to a better essay. Even interesting texts that do not fit the prompt can lead to formulaic or strained analysis. A student who approaches the exam with detailed knowledge of several texts will be able to make good choices.

- Continue to teach a wide range of texts, from traditional and contemporary periods, and from English, American and world literature. The wide variety of texts on which students wrote this year shows that AP teachers are including a rich and interesting selection of novels and plays.
- Encourage students to be familiar with and to use specifics from the text in their essays. Students write better essays when they can use appropriate details to illustrate their claims, citing examples and even a few remembered quotations. Students write weaker essays when they misremember characters' names and can provide only general descriptions of significant moments that are crucial to their focus. Students need to write about texts of which they have a recent and detailed knowledge.
- Give students ample practice with close reading, both verbally and in writing, so they can analyze the meaning of a novel or play and the ways meaning is revealed by literary techniques. Assign practice essays in which students analyze the relationship of a specific aspect of the work (character, event, point of view) to the meaning of the work as a whole.