



Student Performance Q&A: 2012 AP® English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 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 in 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 the poem “Thou Blind Man’s Mark,” by 16th-century poet Sir Philip Sidney, and to write a well-developed essay analyzing how poetic devices help to convey the speaker’s complex attitude toward desire.

With its emphasis on the complex attitude toward desire, the question was designed to lead students to consider the speaker’s complicated understanding of his past engagement with the “worthless ware” he desired and his current hope to have mastered the lesson taught by “virtue”: to seek only inner resources and treasures, while extinguishing the desire for the external things that “snare” the unwary. The prompt asked students to consider how the poet creates multiple dimensions of meaning through the use of poetic devices and to develop an interpretation of the poem through analysis of the connection between technique and meaning.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.98 out of a possible 9 points. This is the lowest mean score on the poetry question in the past eight years, and it reflects a continuing trend in which students have more difficulty with analyzing poetry than they do with prose or the open question. In fact, a number of students did not answer this question at all, perhaps because the poem was challenging.

Responses that earned upper-half scores were characterized by persuasive or reasonable interpretations of the poem and a sense of the complexity with which the speaker characterizes desire. Lower-half essays tended to merely describe the poem and to simplify the speaker’s attitude.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common student error was to write an essay about poetic devices without connection to their effect or to the meaning of the poem; in general, essays that scored in the lower half displayed a weak understanding of the poem's meaning. They were frequently driven and organized by the list of devices rather than by their insights into the poem, and students were unable to connect the devices or techniques with thematic content in the poem. In addition, many students did not see the complexity in the poem or find ways to discuss this complexity; often, for example, they did not see the shift in the sestet or consider its impact on the poem.

Some students did not write an argument or thesis statement about the poem and thus provided evidence from the poem without a controlling idea or analysis of what point the evidence served. Weaker essays placed undue emphasis on punctuation or rhyme scheme rather than focusing on the poet's language and meaning. Some students recognized the poem as a sonnet and commented in some way on form, but others often discussed only part of the poem, leaving out the sestet or the final couplet.

Another common group of errors involved simplifying the poem and the speaker's complex attitude toward desire. Some students wrote essays suggesting that the speaker is simply angry at desire because it ruined his life; without considering his own implication in its "web of will," they saw only his condemnation of it.

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 could help their students by spending more time teaching poetry. The following suggestions may be useful:

- Emphasize the teaching of poetry in AP classes, recognizing that students may find the language and conventions of poetry more puzzling than those of prose. Assign students to analyze the meanings of poems. Combine discussions of well-known poems with assignments requiring students to identify meanings in a poem they have not seen.
- Allow and encourage students to connect first with the meaning of each poem; make the process of analyzing meaning the primary objective of each poetry class. When you turn to devices, make clear that identifying the devices is always secondary, and that each device is important only as students can articulate its contribution to conveying the poet's meaning.
- Teach students to distinguish summary or description of what is in a poem from analysis of its meanings. Help them to develop a vocabulary for the poem's themes and reflections on profound issues.
- Encourage students to understand complexity as one important characteristic of literature and to see that its nature calls for plural, sometimes divergent impulses or attitudes that exist at the same time. Where the study of argument or synthesis may emphasize finding or creating a single unified strand of thought, the analysis of literary passages often calls for sorting out and seeing relations between two or more different, even contradictory ideas or feelings.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to carefully read a passage from *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena María Viramontes and to write a well-organized essay analyzing the development of Estrella's character. The prompt invited students to consider such devices as selection of detail, figurative language, and tone.

This question assessed students' abilities to read closely, with attention to language and detail, in order to consider the connections between Estrella's growing competence with the tools in Perfecto's tool chest and the words that she begins to recognize as tools of another, important sort. At the same time, the question assessed students' abilities to write an effective essay, one with a governing central idea about the development of Estrella's character, organized into coherent units of analysis and supported with appropriate evidence from the passage.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.42 out of a possible 9 points.

Essays that earned scores in the upper half analyzed the passage, finding ways to explain the development of Estrella's character in relation to the specific details in the text. Lower-half essays often described events or details without making a clear connection to Estrella's development.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students wrote very long essays on this question, and they often began by summarizing or paraphrasing the passage, picking up quotations as they wrote. They found Estrella what some called "relatable," especially in the sense that they shared her frustration "when things were kept from her" or when teachers seemed not to give "the information she wanted." Students sought their own argument about "the development of Estrella's character" as they sifted through the rich details in the passage: Some found an argument that emerged late in their essays, whereas other students remained content with description. All these essays would have been improved with a more deliberate and disciplined period of prewriting and thought, leading to a more unified essay beginning with a focused argument about how the development of Estrella's character is represented in the passage.

Students commonly had trouble with tone as they tried to analyze the way this literary element contributes to the representation of Estrella's developing character. At one level, students lacked a vocabulary for identifying nuanced tones, so the tone in this passage was called "happy," "angry," "comfortable," "direct," and "explanatory." More important, relatively few students were able to link tone and meaning, thus making the connection between literary element and its function in supporting the characterization of Estrella. One student did successfully connect these two, writing that Estrella initially views Perfecto's tool box "questioningly ('So what is this?'), with a tone of skepticism."

Some students, lacking a contextual or historical understanding of the conditions of migrant workers, misread Estrella's poverty as her own fault. "Estrella describes herself as a dirty child," one student wrote, and she has a "childish and immature view of the world."

Lower-half essays lacked an argument about the development of Estrella's character and substituted lists of technical elements (with some illustrations) for interpretation of how the devices serve the character's development. They often summarized or described events in the passage, relied on generalizations, and were written in imprecise or ungrammatical language.

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?

Strong student writers were able to form an argument analyzing Estrella's development and to present evidence from the passage supporting their view of its meaning. One student, for example, wrote of "Estrella's monumental realization that language is . . . a powerful box of tools with which one can 'build, bury, tear down, rearrange, and repair.'" Such a valid and interesting claim, supported by detail from the passage, emerges from strategies that teachers can help students learn:

- Encourage students to prewrite, make notes, and develop an argument in answer to the question before they begin to write. Responses that dive into observations about a long prose passage,

sometimes producing a long essay, often begin by describing the passage and only amble toward an interpretive argument as they end. A more successful strategy is to spend time developing an interpretation that addresses the prompt and then to write the essay.

- Give students practice analyzing passages representing the development or change in a character. Although most students could see changes in Estrella, students who wrote essays that scored in the upper half were able to articulate in more nuanced language the ways Viramontes represents these changes using literary elements. Encourage students to explore the meaning of changes in characters and the way these changes are expressed through appropriate literary elements in a passage.
- The successful analysis of literature often rests on an ability to perceive and articulate a sophisticated sense of tone. Teach students to name and think with confidence about variations on tone, ranging from impersonal, factual, and detached to ironic, sarcastic, or skeptical. Spend time with the potential terms for tone and their implications for the representation of one or more characters or events in a passage. Students who can discuss tone with confidence can often make strong arguments about prose passages.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to select a novel or play in which cultural, physical, or geographical surroundings shape psychological or moral traits in a character. Then they were prompted to analyze, in a well-organized essay, how surroundings affect the character and illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole.

This question intended to guide students to begin with an argument about how surroundings influence character; in the words quoted from Pauline Hopkins, “surroundings influence our lives and characters as much as fate, destiny or any supernatural agency.” Students were invited to focus on the way setting affects, alters, or forms the character and highlights the meaning of the text. By asking how “surroundings shape psychological or moral traits,” the question directed students’ attention away from the way characters’ actions and events respond to surroundings, and instead to the connection between outer and inner worlds. By identifying “cultural, physical, or geographical surroundings,” the question invited students to consider surroundings broadly in relation to a cultural milieu, a physical terrain or space, or a geographical or national territory. In asking students to analyze how surroundings illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole, the question directed them to broaden their analysis by relating the character’s response to her or his surroundings to the central themes and meanings of the text.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.77 out of a possible 9 points.

Students often perform better on the open question than on the poetry or prose analyses, perhaps reflecting their strong preparation in AP classes. This year, too, the mean score for the open question was higher than for the other two, reflecting the accessibility of the topic.

Essays that earned scores in the upper half analyzed the connections between surroundings, character traits, and the meaning of the work; students chose appropriate literary texts and wrote well-organized essays supported by telling details. Lower-half essays often summarized the events and described characters in the text, making weak or general assertions about the meaning of the work as a whole.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students did not consider surroundings in any of the rich and varied ways the prompt suggested; instead, they focused on other characters as the “surroundings” of note. These essays often moved away from how surroundings shape “psychological or moral traits” and chose instead to focus on plot, summarizing how interactions with other characters led to a series of events. Some of the essays that considered psychological traits fell into overgeneralized and simplified analysis of psychological motivations, not necessarily justified by textual evidence.

Another common error was to follow an argument along a path of evidence from the text into a summary of events that did not bear on the initial argument. Instead of selecting a single instance that would illustrate or prove an argument about surroundings and their influence, or juxtaposing salient examples from different parts of the text, students pursued a chain of events and ended by summarizing the plot, sometimes returning to their argument only at the end of the essay.

Some writers who began with a plausible and potentially interesting thesis in answer to the prompt were not able to provide detailed and specific support for it. Many lower-half essays were brief and underdeveloped, and some suggested that the student had not read the novel or play recently or attentively. Because an essay that scores in the upper half makes a strong interpretive argument and illustrates it with well-chosen details, having a recent and detailed knowledge of the work and the ability to use appropriate examples is important to success on this question.

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?

Students know that they need to address the prompt specifically and directly, keeping its terms in the foreground of their essays. They also realize that they need to choose an appropriate literary work, one that will enable their essay to make strong and interesting claims in relation to the prompt. Under exam pressure, however, some students disregard this crucial advice. Teachers can help students meet the time pressures of the exam with some preparation. Specifically, teachers should consider the following:

- Although the AP English Development Committee tries to ensure that each prompt for Question 3 will work to some degree for a wide range of fiction and drama, students’ choices of texts make a significant difference in the likelihood of their writing a high-scoring essay. Assign students to review at least six texts they have studied closely, recalling detailed scenes, characters’ names, themes, and issues that matter in each text. A student who approaches the exam with detailed knowledge of several texts will be able to make a better choice and to write a better essay.
- Encourage students to analyze the prompt and to prewrite on the specific issues it raises before they begin an essay. Give them practice in developing an argument that answers the question and in revising the argument to increase its complexity before they begin to write.
- Give students practice developing an organizational structure for their essays out of the terms and concepts in the prompt. If the prompt calls for analysis of how surroundings affect a character, shaping psychological or moral traits, assign students exercises in which they identify primary surroundings in a text and link these to a character’s development of certain psychological or moral traits.
- Teach students to be able to identify and articulate the themes or meanings of the work as a whole. Students who have an understanding of 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.
- Give students practice selecting detail and example in support of a point and integrating evidence

well with a general argument. More practice connecting a general idea and specific textual evidence designed to support it would lead to better essays.

- Continue to teach a wide range of texts, from traditional and contemporary periods, from English, American, and world literature. The wide variety of texts on which students wrote this year shows that AP teachers include a rich selection of novels and plays in their courses.