



Student Performance Q&A:

2014 AP® English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP® English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Warren J. Carson of the University of South Carolina Upstate, Spartanburg, South Carolina. 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 carefully read the poem “For That He Looked Not upon Her” by 16th-century English poet George Gascoigne and to write an essay analyzing how the poet employs such devices as form, diction, and imagery to develop the complex attitude of the speaker in the poem.

Similar to previous free-response poetry questions on the exam, this question focused on devices as vehicles for conveying meaning, and students were invited to explore the relationships between devices and meaning in the context of a 16th-century sonnet. The sonnet form situates the speaker’s complex attitude in ways that offer student writers the opportunity to follow his reasoning for his reluctance to fall victim to the gloom and misery of rejection a second time. The three quatrains provide metaphors that build upon one another as they lead to the closing couplet of the sonnet. These metaphors are enriched by elevated diction and abundant imagery, both of which are common properties of the 16th-century English sonnet, and which provide additional material that solidifies the speaker’s caution about facing one with whom he is smitten and whose beauty and allure have drawn him in before.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.16 out of a possible 9 points.

While this year’s mean score is slightly lower than last year’s mean of 4.21, the more important comparison is with the 2012 exam, which also featured a 16th-century English sonnet. For the 2012 poetry question, the mean was 3.98; clearly, this year’s mean score on poetry is a considerable improvement. Generally speaking, students writing on this year’s poetry question found the poem accessible, such that almost every student found something to say about the poem. Comparatively speaking, there were considerably fewer blank papers than in 2012 or 2013, and even the essays that scored in the lower half showed that students felt more at ease writing poetry analysis. Moreover, many more students had obviously been taught the sonnet as a poetic form; thus, they knew how the form was used to organize and develop the content and were able to write exactly about how the poet used literary devices to convey meaning.

The stronger essays were mature, insightful, and astute, and many of the upper-half essays had engaging introductions, probing analyses, and substantial conclusions. To our delight, many of the students delivered essays with original approaches to addressing the prompt, among them several infused with pop culture and hip hop-influenced interpretations that nevertheless honored literary standards and traditions.

What were common student errors or omissions?

For the most part, students do not display the same level of confidence when writing about poetry as they do when writing about prose. This shortcoming is still apparent in many of the essays on this year's poetry question. Many students simply could not unpack the poem in terms of its various devices. Many of those who were able to identify devices appropriately sometimes failed to connect the device with the function — the form with the function, if you will. While this year's test-takers did perform better than those writing on the 16th-century sonnet two years ago, many of the essays still were device driven instead of insight driven; that is, students could list devices but could not explain effect. Furthermore, students often do not recognize that *complexity* is the opposite of *superficiality*, and while they can sometimes read the poem literally, they often do not probe deeper to discover figurative uses of language. Thus their analyses are often partial at best. On this year's exam, there was the usual tendency to paraphrase and summarize but not take the extra step of actually using paraphrase and summary in the service of analysis. Fortunately, we did not see students attempting to use rhetorical strategies from their AP English Language courses (as they did with the Sidney sonnet in 2012).

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?

- Continue to teach students traditional poetic forms as well as free verse.
- Emphasize not only the identification of literary devices, but also the demonstration of how they work in the poem.
- Be realistic in teaching literary devices. Students need to know how typical elements like imagery, personification, and symbol work in poems before venturing into obscure and pretentious elements like polysyndeton.
- Help students stay focused on the prompt rather than bringing in extraneous matters.
- In practice writing assignments, continue to emphasize the difference between analysis and summary or paraphrase.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to carefully read a passage from Edward P. Jones' novel *The Known World* and to write a well-organized essay on how the author uses literary elements to reveal the character of Moses.

Students were provided with another opportunity to analyze how literary devices are employed by an author to present and develop a character. In the case of Moses, a careful reading of the passage shows him to be a complex character, one who is aware of and sometimes attuned to nature, but who charts his own course of action and derives knowledge and experience in different ways. Students were offered the suggestions of point of view, selection of detail, and imagery as possible literary elements for analysis; many chose one or more of these as the basis for their analysis of character revelation, but often students ventured beyond this suggested list. Ultimately, the question was designed to assess students' ability to read closely, to glean details in context, and to write clearly and knowingly about their discoveries.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.10 out of a possible 9 points.

Generally, students found this passage accessible, and many were able to identify several literary techniques, including point of view, selection of detail, personification, and sensory clues, among others. The most successful students were able to combine their observations about literary techniques into a coherent whole with theses that were assertive and complex. Less successful student writers were able to note how particular literary techniques illuminated an idea but struggled either with too many separate thoughts or with too little real development of ideas to illustrate the point they were attempting to make. The length of the passage seemed to have posed a particular challenge for students. Many students, faced with such a rich and complex passage, attempted to address as many things as possible about the character rather than making deliberate choices about what to choose for a more in-depth analysis. Overall, this year's prose passage proved as challenging as those in previous years, albeit for different reasons, thus the drop in the mean score from last year's exam.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students found being faced with a number of possibilities a challenge. Those who tried to write about everything in the passage rather than focusing on a few salient points for discussion tended to generate superficial treatments of the prompt. By far the most common shortcoming of this year's essays was their tendency toward superficiality. Many students could adequately identify, summarize, and paraphrase, but they were especially challenged in their ability to deliver careful analyses of the prompt. Further, many essays exhibited a kind of formulaic writing that might have been the result of being taught a template for writing the Advanced Placement essay. While stronger student writers could often develop these templates into successful essays, all too often less well prepared students used them as "fill in the blank" devices that proved inadequate to deal with the complex prose contained in the passage.

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?

- Continue to teach students how to focus on the writing prompt, and then to focus further on important parts of the prose passage to use in the analysis.
- Do more work with the idea of complexity in prose works, especially in character analysis.
- Provide more practice opportunities for students so that they can not only identify literary devices, but so that they also can connect those devices to meaning in the passage.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to select a character from a novel or play who has deliberately sacrificed, surrendered, or forfeited something in a way that highlights his or her values. They then were to write an essay that analyzed how the act illuminates the character's values and provides a deeper understanding of the meaning of the work as a whole.

The question presented students with a complex writing opportunity that focused initially on describing a character's sacrifice, surrender, or forfeiture, and then on analyzing what the act reveals about the character's values. Finally, the question invited students to comment on how the matters of sacrifice and values provided for a deeper understanding of the whole work. Since Question 3 is the "open question," students were supplied a list of suggested texts, or they could — and many times did — select another novel or play of comparable literary merit for their analyses.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.54 out of a possible 9 points.

This year's question was accessible to all students. Virtually every response, even the least successful, addressed the prompt. Whether the essay was a single incoherent paragraph or six pages of sophisticated prose, each student writer was able to identify a character's sacrifice that illuminated values and link that sacrifice to the meaning of the work as a whole. Because this year's prompt directly asked students to write about character, students had more to say than, for example, in response to a prompt that might also be about character but was further complicated by the inclusion of genre (*bildungsroman*) or technique (symbol) as in previous years' prompts. The stronger student writers this year demonstrated maturation in their ability to express the meaning of the work as a whole. The more talented students were able to eloquently express the deeper meaning of the text as well as to lift that idea to issues in the larger world. For weaker students, the meaning might be simplified or stated as cliché, yet the idea was nevertheless plausible. While the mean score on this year's exam is slightly lower than last year's, the quality of the overall performance on this question speaks volumes on the preparation that students bring to the open question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

When faced with choosing a work on which to base an analysis of a text in response to a prompt, many students fail to give proper consideration to the selection. That lack of thought often leads students to resort to mere plot summary instead of providing a careful analysis of the prompt. Further, many 18-year-olds just seem unable to attend to complexity in a text, or they simply reduce what is difficult to a level of simplicity. Lack of focus continues to work against some students' ability to write a careful analysis. Many get stuck at the point of summary and paraphrase, and still others tend to oversimplify issues, equating literary analysis with reduction rather than with illuminating complex ideas contained in the work. Despite these errors and omissions, however, students did appear to take the exam seriously and attempt a response. As a result, there were far fewer blanks and zeroes on this year's exam.

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?

- Make sure that students have a better sense of the historical and cultural contexts of the novel or play that they choose to write about.
- As much as time permits, lead students into discussions of the deeper issues raised by the plot, complex character psychology, nuances of language, etc., so that they can better address the work as a whole.
- Continue to teach students how to organize their ideas for maximum effect. Ordinal, chronological, and climactic order are still important considerations, even in a five-paragraph essay.