



Student Performance Q&A:

2015 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 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. 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 “XIV” by 20th-century Caribbean writer Derek Walcott and to write a well-developed essay discussing the speaker’s recollection of visiting an elderly woman storyteller and analyzing how Walcott employs poetic devices to convey the significance of the experience.

This question is not unlike previous free-response poetry questions in that it focuses the students’ attention on devices as vehicles for conveying meaning. This year students were invited to identify and expound upon the relationship between devices and meaning in a contemporary poem written by a poet from an English-speaking country that represents a culture unfamiliar to many students, but that includes some universal experiences of childhood that students could identify with in their discussion of the speaker’s recollection. The speaker’s recollection of the journey toward enlightenment and inspiration was not lost on most students, nor was the speaker’s assessment of the importance of that experience years hence. The abundant and varied imagery, the air of wonderment, and the palpable awe, along with the careful rendering of the memory of the storyteller and recognition of the importance of her tales to the speaker’s later life, seemed to make this poem and the accompanying exam question accessible to students.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.06 out of a possible 9 points.

This year’s prompt was very accessible and allowed wide latitude to students, although many students had a false confidence about the poem since it is a 20th-century poem with more familiar vocabulary than poems from earlier periods. While typical literary devices such as simile and metaphor, personification and imagery, alliteration and rhyme appeared in large numbers in students’ responses, those students who ranged farther afield in their choices, considering structure, setting, or contrast, for example, seemed better positioned to

discuss the poem’s meaning. Unfortunately, many students seemed ill-equipped to discover ambiguity, complexity, or irony in the poem. Even so, most students could find something to say about the poem, and blank papers occurred with less frequency than in some previous years. A number of essays that earned mid-range scores tended toward a superficial, reductionist treatment of the poem and the prompt, sometimes ignoring the latter altogether. Stronger writers, however, were able to make the necessary and desired connections to the prompt, and many of them wrote fluid, engaging prose that demonstrated an impressive mastery of the elements of composition.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although many students did manifest a knowledge of terminology, some of the knowledge was at best partial. Students pointed out poetic devices, but in the majority of cases were unable to make the leap from list to significance. In other cases, those who did discuss significance were often unable to convey how the devices they chose actually achieved it. Also, many essays contained partial analyses that failed to consider the entire poem, and many ended with no real conclusion. In addition, students often provided an abundance of textual evidence through quotation, which may or may not have illustrated the device being examined, and which all too often lacked connection to the prompt itself. As suggested above, many students, even the better writers, are often challenged by contemporary poetic texts that do not necessarily “look like” poetry with a recognizable meter, stanzaic structure, or rhyme scheme. A number of this year’s writers thus branded the poem “free verse” and launched into inadequate analyses of the poem’s form.

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?

- Help students embrace complexity in poetry and move them beyond the denotative to the connotative meanings.
- Continue to help students connect devices with meaning and engage them more with why a writer may use devices such as simile or assonance or a particular image in a poem.
- Teach students that literary works should be seen as whole in themselves and that when they analyze a work, in this case, a poem, they should deal with all of it instead of only a few lines.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully an early passage from Louise Erdrich’s 1986 novel *The Beet Queen* and to write a well-developed essay analyzing how devices such as tone, imagery, selection of detail, and point of view aided Erdrich in depicting the impact of the environment on the two children.

In the free-response prose question, students were presented with the challenge of analyzing how the author employed literary devices to introduce and establish characters. In the case of the children, Karl and Mary, though they are relatively young (14 and 11, respectively), complexities of character are already discernible through their varied responses to their circumstances and surroundings. Many students could quickly grasp these complexities and could analyze the presentation of the characters through apt discussions of suggested devices, though many ventured beyond the list to offer their own take on devices at work in the passage. In sum, the prose question was designed to assess students’ ability to read closely, to extract pertinent details, and to write well about the passage within the context of the prompt.

How well did students perform on this question?

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

Compared with recent passages, this year’s passage proved more accessible and rich. The responses at many points on the scoring range demonstrated that students understood the passage and the prompt, grasping both central details about the narrative and the essential writing task asked of them. Readers found that there were fewer misreadings or confusions about the passage. Many students succeeded in identifying key moments in the story to analyze, and while some were content to assert that each key moment demonstrated an impact of the environment, stronger writers were able to show how those key moments operated and how they fit into a larger reading of the passage. Those essays that scored in the upper half contained clear theses that were focused, identified some complexity, and were supported in the essays by fully developed paragraphs. These paragraphs included multiple, apt, and supporting references to the text. Many students were able to introduce, develop, and conclude their ideas, sustaining them for the full length of the essay.

What were common student errors or omissions?

While nearly every student was able to read and understand the passage and the prompt, many students struggled at times to clarify their thoughts, articulate analysis, and effectively organize their own language. Also, students were prone to speculation, sometimes offering that instead of real analysis. As usual in prompts that offer suggested tools to aid in analysis, many students seemed to feel obligated to try to address all of the suggested devices (tone, imagery, selection of detail, and point of view) in a 40-minute essay, rather than choosing one or two for a fuller, deeper, less superficial analysis.

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 focus on helping students to identify important bits of a passage in order to see how a reader might select details to piece together in an overall reading.
- Help students move away from line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph commentary in favor of assembling evidence in a more logical, effective way.
- Continue to help students explore complexity by moving away from simplistic, reductionist, or “too neat” readings of the passage.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

For the “open question” students were asked to select a novel, play, or epic poem in which acts of cruelty are important to the theme of the work and to write a well-organized essay analyzing how cruelty functions in the work as a whole and what the cruelty reveals about the perpetrator and/or victim.

This question presented students with a complex, multi-level task of identifying acts of cruelty, determining what the cruelty says about the perpetrator and/or victim, and then analyzing the deeper impact of cruelty on the work as a whole. For the “open question” students were offered a list of texts that would work well for the prompt. While many students made their selections for analysis from this recommended list, others chose from an impressive variety of other texts, ancient to contemporary, classic and noncanonical, for their analyses.

How well did students perform on this question?

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

The question worked extraordinarily well. The prompt included only two tasks for students to perform as opposed to the three-pronged prompts in some previous years' exams. Every student could respond to this year's prompt, although with varying degrees of success. Even at the lowest range of scores and in essays with the least competent writing, a student could identify a moment of cruelty in a book he or she had read and comment on what it signified. At the upper range, students were able to more subtly discuss the ways in which a distinction between a perpetrator and victim might be blurred. Indeed, stronger student writers expanded the significance of cruelty beyond the text to their own worlds and discussed the futility of wars, the pervasiveness of racism, the lingering traces of cultural imperialism, the ongoing struggle of feminism, and the abuse of those who are labeled as different.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The challenges of this year's question seemed few. Indeed, the strength of this year's question also seemed to be its only challenge — because the prompt was so accessible, students wrote full, easy, long responses that at times did not include as much critical thinking as a more challenging question might have provoked. Essays could have perhaps been more thoughtful. Students tended to select the most obvious perpetrator in a work of literature rather than consider the subtle interconnection between perpetrators and victims or propose that the perpetrator might be victimized. While many students still tend to reduce the meaning of a work to a facile opposition (for example, man vs. nature) many more students are less inclined to do so.

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?

- Encourage students to *prepare* for the open-ended question so that they come to the exam with the correct book title, author's name, characters' names, and some sense of the theme of the work.
- Help students broaden the conversation beyond the text itself to particular historical circumstances and culture of the imaginative world and of the author's own time and place.
- Help students contemplate how they can learn something about themselves and our world as they read critically and closely, so they can better appreciate how literature can both inform and enrich us.