



Student Performance Q&A:

2016 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 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?

Question 1, the poetry question, asked students to read carefully “Juggler,” a poem by the modern American poet Richard Wilbur, and write an essay in which they analyzed how the speaker in the poem describes the juggler and what that description reveals about the speaker. The prompt suggested that students consider such poetic elements as imagery, figurative language, and tone as ways to engage with the poem and the required focus of the analysis. Since the poetry question is typically the most challenging of the free-response questions, students are usually offered poetic elements as a way to access the poem with an eye toward how the poet employs these elements as vehicles for conveying meaning. Further, this prompt was deliberately worded so that students would remember to engage the poem as a complete work and not fall into the trap of simply commenting haphazardly on how the poet used one element or another or simply listing what the poetic elements describe.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.98 out of a possible 9 points.

Poetry analysis generally proves to be quite difficult for student writers, and this year’s writing opportunity was no exception. Inasmuch as Wilbur is a highly allusive poet, students often had difficulty separating the literal from the figurative, as well as with sticking to the prompt’s foci on the juggler *and* the speaker. While many students employed the suggested poetic elements in their analysis of the speaker’s description of the juggler, many wrote about other elements. Whatever the case, showing how these elements actually work in the poem, instead of merely defining the elements, continues to be a real challenge for many students. Also, many students wrote only partial answers to the prompt, often ignoring or forgetting to address the importance of the speaker. On the other hand, many students easily discovered multiple points of entry for discussion, and the form of the poem prompted some students to write well about structure. A number of

students also dealt successfully with tonal shift in the poem. The best essays engaged fully all of the dimensions of the prompt and in mature, often fluid prose, provided astute analyses of Wilbur’s poem.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often demonstrate lack of skill with poetry analysis. Even when they can define poetic terms or elements, they struggle mightily with applying them in context. Many essays on “Juggler” revealed little more than the barest form of explication, mostly a retelling of the plot with a listing of various poetic devices with little commentary. Further, there frequently was an absence of a sustained argument and an over reliance on paraphrase as opposed to analysis. Many essays dealt only partially with the prompt, and many others did not treat the full text of the poem in the analysis. Still another frequent weakness in the essays was that words or ideas were often taken out of context — in the case of “Juggler,” the words “heaven” and “lightheartedness” — and forced to fit into some other preconceived idea. A final observation regarding weaknesses is that while writers liberally quoted lines from the poem, in too many cases the quotations did not fit the arguments, nor did they illustrate much in support of the argument at all.

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?

- Instruct students not just in terminology and meaning but also in applying the terminology in analysis.
- Instruct students in precise reading — how to move beyond the superficial first-level meaning of a poem.
- Have students write more, from constructing thesis statements, to sentence combining, to more formal composition; in short, more writing of almost any variety would be helpful.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to read carefully a passage from Thomas Hardy’s 19th-century novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and then write an essay in which they used literary elements such as tone, word choice, and selection of detail to analyze Hardy’s portrayal of the complex relationship between the two characters, the Mayor and his daughter. Students were thus directed to consider complexity in a relationship that is foregrounded in a complex text. The rich passage provided students with ample material to address the prompt from any number of points of departure. Given the passage’s complexity, and the added complexity that comes along with engaging with fiction written in 19th-century English prose, students were offered several ways to consider how the author employed literary elements to portray the relationship between Michael Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.34 out of a possible 9 points.

Student writers often feel more comfortable and confident when writing prose analysis, even about a complex 19th-century English novel like Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Because students are often instructed in the essentials of character analysis, students engaged well with this year’s prompt and many wrote considerably longer essays than we usually see on the prose question. Students seemed to find the passage accessible, and they found ample material in the passage to engage with in their essays, including a compelling plot, conflict, descriptions, dialogue, and context clues. In addition, the passage offered various points of entry so that even less-skilled writers could engage with it. Mere plot summary, common in some

years, was rare with this passage, and even lower-half essays contained moments of analysis. Moreover, there were many writers who not only addressed directly the relationship between the two characters, but did so in writing that was clear, detailed, and often elegant.

What were common student errors or omissions?

One shortcoming of these essays was that many focused solely on a description of the characters rather than on an analysis of the relationship between the two. Also, although students could often define literary elements such as tone, word choice, and selection of detail in isolation, they demonstrated much difficulty in showing how such elements actually function in the text. Too many students literally followed the direction to pay “particular attention” to tone, word choice, and selection of detail and tried to attend to each instead of focusing on one or two for more in-depth analysis. The result was often a generic, superficial essay. Also, while many students had no trouble understanding the events of the long passage, the material from the passage used in the essays was actually fairly narrow. In other words, many writers did not use many of the rich details available; indeed, the passage offered more nuanced details than many students utilized. Another omission regards tone, which many students struggled to understand. There were abundant descriptions of tone, many off base, and many students simply stopped after naming the tone, rather than discussing why the tone was important or how it contributed to the complex relationship between the two characters.

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 understand HOW to analyze by asking questions of the passage.
- Help students understand “complex” and complexity, as students are often so quick to “answer” the prompt that they oversimplify the passage and miss the complexity.
- Encourage students to consider the passage in its entirety and to draw support from throughout the passage as they develop their arguments.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

For Question 3, the “Open” question, students were asked to choose a novel or play in which a character deliberately deceives others and then write an essay in which they analyze the motives for the character’s deception and how the deception contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. This year’s prompt, like many previous “Open” question prompts, was deliberately worded so that students are challenged to focus first on analyzing a specific element or dimension of a novel or play, in this case a character’s deception and the motives for it, and then on broadening or expanding the analysis to address how the specific element informs or impacts the work as a whole. Because students have the ability to choose the text they will analyze for this question, many of these essays are far stronger than either of the more focused essays on poetry or prose analysis. A hallmark of the “Open” question continues to be the broad and impressive range of texts that students are able to base their analysis on.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.33 out of a possible 9 points.

Many students wrote exceedingly well in response to the prompt. Whereas the prompt encouraged students to move from identifying deception in a novel or play to analyzing the motivation for the deception, students more often quickly stated the deception but then spent more time discussing the consequences of the effect of that deception rather than the motivation. On the other hand, many students wrote about self-deception,

and argued productively that a character who deceives others is, by the very nature of the act, self-deceptive. Lower-half essays tended to oversimplify the subtleties of deception or blurred deception with other vices such as revenge or greed or cruelty. Upper-half essays demonstrated that students made careful, thoughtful choices of texts and characters, selecting examples that proved to be well matched to the requirements of the prompt. Many of the better essays contained carefully selected detail from long novels or plays that specifically supported an argument. Many of the best essays showed a broadened discussion of deception to include historical, cultural, and social issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students lapsed into mere plot summary that was absent of any analysis whatsoever. Also, a surprising number of students continue to be unable or unwilling to extend the analysis beyond the specific element contained in the prompt (in this case a character's deception *and* the motives for it) to include a consideration of the work as a whole, and thus received only partial credit. Also, many writers organized the discussion according to separate characters or separate acts of deception rather than focusing on a single character in a single text, and many struggled to probe motivation. Overall, too many students still come to the exam with an overly general sense of a novel or play they have read, and while they may be able to summarize the plot in broad strokes, they have not adequately prepared for the exam in advance and are clearly at a loss with regard to detail and textual support.

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 understand that on the “Open” question, they will only ever write on a *single* work of literature.
- Continue to instruct students on organization and development of an idea in essays.
- Help students understand the difference between formal, college-level expression and informal, colloquial writing.
- Help students see the hand of the author at work and to appreciate why the writer chooses a course of action in plot or character.