



## Student Performance Q&A:

### 2001 AP<sup>®</sup> English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Faculty Consultant regarding the 2001 free-response questions for AP English Language and Composition. *They are intended to assist AP workshop consultants as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for the AP Exams.* They give an overview of each question and its performance, 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 included. Consultants are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

#### General Comments

The free-response section of the 2001 AP English Language and Composition Exam asked students to demonstrate a mastery of three types of writing assignments: an analysis of a writer's use of rhetorical strategies to establish a position; an analysis of a writer's use of stylistic techniques to convey the complexity of her response; and the creation of an argument in response to a writer's position. These essays replicate the kind of assignments that students are frequently asked to complete in introductory college courses in rhetoric and composition. When these writing prompts are combined with the multiple-choice sections of the test, the 2001 examination offers students a variety of ways to demonstrate their competency as readers, thinkers, and writers.

As usual, we found that the students who relied upon using their critical thinking skills, rather than upon using someone else's programmatic approach, wrote the best essays. The better students were familiar with the essay as a genre, and they did not confuse writing an essay with writing an examination answer. They treated their intended audience as though they were open-minded and intellectually curious and wrote as though writer and reader were participating in a shared intellectual journey. This year's most successful students read the prompt closely, generated insights based upon their reading, and wrote well-developed, thoughtful essays in ways that reflected their personal style.

#### Question 1

*What was intended by the question?*

This question asked students to read an 1866 letter written by the English novelist George Eliot and to analyze the "rhetorical strategies" that Eliot uses to establish her position about the development of a writer. The prompt allows students to demonstrate their knowledge of the cause-and-effect relationship between rhetorical strategies and the given rhetorical situation in which they are used. The prompt also allows students to demonstrate their understanding of rhetoric in both abstract and concrete terms, to display their ability to recognize specific rhetorical strategies, and to support their claims with exemplification from Eliot's letter. In addition, the

question allows students to display their ability to use such techniques to persuade the faculty consultants that their claims about Eliot's strategies are reasonable and plausible.

*How well did the students perform? What were common errors or omissions?*

While such analysis is a fairly routine task in a college-level composition course, many of this year's students lacked sufficient knowledge about rhetoric and were unable to articulate how Eliot employs its strategies as a means of persuasion. Many students could cite a variety of terms: they mentioned such strategies as accommodation, allusion, analogy, aphorism, comparison/contrast, concession, flattery, identification, irony, metaphor, negation, paradox, praise, quotation, reassurance, rebuttal, reiteration, repetition, rhetorical question, self-effacement, simile, and tone, making an occasional nod to Greek and Latin terms such as parataxis and zeugma, even when they were unsure of their meaning. Frequently, however, they failed to connect the terms they had invoked with their specific purpose in the passage, relying instead on repeating memorized definitions.

**The best papers** acknowledged the rhetorical situation for the letter and focused on the personal context for Eliot's advice, rather than viewing the letter as generic advice to aspiring writers. Such papers went beyond mechanical enumerations of terms or abstract claims of strategy, and they frequently recognized and addressed Eliot's subtlety of language and tone. Many noted the letter's maternal imagery and its references to domestic duty, finding the letter to be an expression of a kindred feminist spirit. The most perceptive discerned the letter's irony and paradox. These essays also evidenced their writers' command of language and fluency of expression.

Writers of **middle-range responses** often seemed to be frustrated by the lack of transparency in Eliot's strategies. While they seemed to understand the general thrust of Eliot's letter, they were unable to offer full explanations of how the specific strategies that they cited helped Eliot establish her position. They often seemed to sense that the letter was subtle in its appeals, but they were unable to discern or elaborate upon its nuances. Such responses evidenced a somewhat mechanical approach, applying a generic template that made for mediocre analysis and writing. The plodding earnestness of belabored and mostly unproductive discussions of the holy trinity of diction, syntax, and imagery only seemed to weaken their effect.

**Weaker papers** frequently found the passage difficult to understand. They often misread Eliot's tone, seeing the letter as an angry and frustrated denial of the value of artistic efforts. Others summarized with little success or listed strategies without attempting to explain how and why they worked. Still others saw the prompt as an occasion to share their own frustrations about writing or their AP teacher whom they claimed had failed to teach rhetoric and rhetorical terms in their year's study. We encountered more of the latter than usual, suggesting that students are feeling less prepared to discuss rhetorical strategies, whether or not the fault lies with their teachers.

Even the top-level essays seemed to be less sparkling than in previous years, and, in general, students responded to the demands of rhetorical analysis with somewhat less success than they had in previous years. While the best students were able to demonstrate their abilities with ease, more students than usual seemed unwilling or unprepared to rise to the challenge we provided. Consequently, there were more essays that earned scores in the lower range of the rubric than in the recent past.

## Question 2

*What was intended by the question?*

Question 2 asked students to analyze how Mary Oliver’s style in “Owls,” one of 15 prose pieces in her 1995 volume *Blue Pastures*, conveys her complex response to nature. Looking at elements of style and the way in which they shape readers’ response to nonfiction prose — the rhetorical purpose of their use in nonfiction writing can often be slightly different than their use in other genres — is frequently part of our discussion of effective writing in college-level composition courses. The prompt asked students to demonstrate their knowledge of stylistic devices and their understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship of such techniques when they are employed for a specific purpose. In case students needed some help in defining Oliver’s purpose, the prompt provided them with that information: to “convey the complexity of her response to nature.” Students were also expected to use their own rhetorical strategies and stylistic devices to convince their readers that their analysis was credible.

*How well did the students perform? What were common errors or omissions?*

Students responded with less success on this question than on the other two and with less-than-usual success on prompts that focus on stylistic analysis. Students were challenged by Oliver’s language because they had been trained to look for literary techniques and, when such techniques as symbolism were not present, they shoehorned them into their discussion anyway. Too many students were relying on memorized laundry lists of stylistic terms without reading carefully to see if such terms were significant in the overall thrust of Oliver’s text. Whatever the cause, students’ difficulty with this question is clearly reflected in its mean score: almost 0.5 lower than the mean for the other two questions. Yet, almost all students found something to say about this prompt — even the weakest responses were quite lengthy. The success of the essays seemed to hinge upon how well their authors could read the passage within its clearly stated context and how well they planned their responses before they began to write.

The **best papers** offered a clear analysis of the complexity of Oliver’s response and moved through the contrasts that the passage provided. Superior essays recognized that Oliver used the resources of style to demonstrate that, in the words of one student writer, “that in nature which is awesome is also awful.” Many of the better essays addressed the sensuousness of the passage or commented upon the relationship between its lyricism and the emotional swoon Oliver experiences when confronted with nature’s paradoxes.

**Middle-range papers** frequently recognized specific stylistic devices but were less successful in explaining how they helped Oliver to convey the complexity of her response. These students could recognize the stylistic elements of the passage but had difficulty in putting them together into a coherent explanation of their relationship to the passage as a whole. Many middle-range essays divided their discussion between positive and negative diction, times and places of happiness, or times and places of fear, but they were unable to identify the paradox of such combinations and the way in which it is essential to Oliver’s response.

**Lower-range papers** reflected their writers’ confusion with the passage. Some of these students equated “complex” with confused and concluded that Oliver herself was confused. Others decided to use a psychological approach, arguing that Oliver’s own nature was disturbed or disturbing. Many attempted to summarize the passage or to elaborate on the insignificant, or they invented an oxymoron that did not exist. A number of weaker writers also added sad personal asides explaining that they had not been adequately prepared for such a difficult passage.

An unusually large number of students treated the passage as though it were highly symbolic, interpreting the owl as the devil, God, the Grim Reaper, the serpent in the Garden of Eden,

predatory people, the United States, Hitler, and even the often-cited Hester Prynne. Such students went looking for symbols as though they were interpreting a work of overly symbolic literature or literary allegory, failing to recognize that in nature writing, an owl is usually just an owl. The relationship of style and purpose frequently eluded students. Many invented evidence for techniques that seemed out of place in a selection of descriptive, nonfiction writing, and then they used their invented evidence to justify their description of the piece as an allegory or as moral instruction.

### Question 3

*What was intended by the question?*

This prompt required students to develop an argument in response to Susan Sontag’s claim, taken from a passage from her 1977 book *On Photography*, that photography limits our understanding of the world. It asked students to use the passage as a springboard from which to write an essay that supported, refuted, or qualified Sontag’s position. Of the three prompts, this task most closely resembles the type of writing project that students undertake in introductory college composition courses. More than the other two questions, Question 3 demands that students employ rhetorical strategies and stylistic devices to persuade their audience that their argument is reasoned and reasonable.

*How well did the students perform? What were common errors or omissions?*

Students found responding to the prompt remarkably easy to undertake, despite the complexity of Sontag’s prose. They had something to say about photography and had little trouble retrieving photographs from their own memories to use as appropriate evidence. Many students referred to photographs from specific historical situations, recalling both the photographs and their historical context with compelling details. They also seemed less intimidated about writing an argument than they had been by analyzing the work of others and produced lengthy responses. Consequently this question read more slowly than the others because students had something that they wanted to say about the topic. While students found plenty to say, many relied too heavily upon such clichés as “a picture is worth a thousand words” and overlooked the important role carefully selected evidence and details play in the construction of convincing arguments.

The **best papers** engaged Sontag’s argument fully, considered its implications carefully, and established a clear position in relation to her claim. Rather than feeling compelled to offer a wide range of supporting material, such writers focused on one or two famous photographs or one or two historical situations that clearly related to Sontag’s claim and then offered a full explanation of how this evidence supported the central idea they were addressing. Such papers presented clear rationales for including their examples.

Papers in the **middle range** seemed more interested in answering the prompt as though they had no responsibility to reflect upon the topic in depth or to consider the issues that it raises carefully. These rather flat-footed responses were generally clear but were neither insightful nor thought provoking. Their writers focused on making an assertion, offering adequate exemplification, and summarizing their position. They did not deal with either the nuances of their own claim nor those of Sontag’s and frequently oversimplified in their rush toward simply “answering the question.” Not surprisingly, such essays also demonstrated less success in employing the arts of persuasion.

Writers of **lower-range papers** could often recall important historical or personal photographs or tell stories about events surrounding such photographs. But they rarely connected their reminiscences into a clearly defined position. Frequently, such papers simply described a photograph without pointing out the implications that they expected their readers to draw. Others felt compelled to

talk about literature — even though such references almost never seemed appropriate. Hester Prynne made unexpected and inappropriate appearances in the essays for Question 3 as well, as though some students were determined to use something from the novel that they had read during the year or as though they had confused Question 3 with its counterpart on the literature exam.

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### **What were common threads of error?**

Students continue to be more comfortable identifying strategies and techniques than explaining how these aspects of language work within the specific text they are being asked to analyze. This “scavenger hunt” for terms and/or strategies leads them to read with little real attention to the direction of the author’s writing or her intended purpose and audience. Consequently they often fail to analyze how a given rhetorical situation shapes an author’s language. They frequently make the same mistake in composing their own argument, forgetting that they are writing an essay, ignoring their intended audience, and overlooking their opportunity to demonstrate their ability to use rhetorical strategies and stylistic devices. More than ever, this year’s students frequently seemed to be writing for the literature exam, even though their prompts had specifically asked them to look at passages of nonfiction and their assigned activities called for the discerning eyes of a rhetorician rather than those of a literary critic. This inappropriate focus led many students down paths that proved useless for the intellectual journeys they had been asked to undertake, and they were unable to demonstrate either an understanding of the selected passages or of their elements. They frequently seemed confused about what constitutes appropriate evidence in all three prompts and failed to construct rationales for their choices.

### **What can teachers do to improve performance?**

- The College Board has created a number of opportunities for teachers — local workshops and summer institutes — to become better informed about the philosophy and content of AP courses. While various Web sites and online discussion groups that AP provides can prove quite useful, nothing takes the place of the opportunities that the workshop setting provides for teachers to share effective teaching strategies and to discuss problems and solutions that are relevant to particular classroom settings.
- Suggestions and Guidelines:
  - Reading well — for denotation and connotation, inference and implication — is an important ingredient in helping young writers to develop their writing skills. Therefore, the AP English Language and Composition course should focus on the close reading of a variety of genres and texts from a variety of historical periods. When we teach these texts, we need to help students understand the conventions of the genres and their relationship to rhetorical situations. This year’s exam helps us understand, for example, that personal letters generally use rhetorical strategies in a manner that is different than that of more public writing and that nature writing is rarely moralistic or allegorical. While the conventions of literature and nonfiction prose share some features, others are rarely present in both genres.
  - Students need to be trained to read essay prompts as texts, making certain that they have understood what they are being asked to do before they begin writing.
  - Writing good essays requires ideas and a position; both require a depth of thinking that is neither programmatic nor simplistic. The development of critical thinking skills must be nurtured through careful and thoughtful discussions of reading and writing assignments.

- One of the primary purposes of essays is to convince the reader that the writer’s point of view is viable. Such persuasion requires both logic and an emotional quality. While we often teach students to recognize these elements, we also need to help them incorporate such resources of language into their own persuasive writing, whether they are attempting an analysis or establishing their own position.
- We need to focus on helping students recognize that they must decipher a text’s meaning before they can go on a successful search for strategies and techniques. To begin with the latter leads to a list of parts that may be only tangentially related to the primary effect of the text. Such approaches generally lack insight about the relationship between the parts and the whole and are often rather superficial in their observations.
- Students need to understand the difference between “telling” details and details that merely pad arguments. We need to help them recognize that more details are not necessarily better and that three examples may or may not be better than two.
- We should not require students to refer to novels or other literary texts to gain credence for their arguments. Instead, we should teach them to use evidence for which they can clearly articulate their rationale. This approach produces the best evidence, regardless of its source. No matter how high-minded some evidence may sound, it is simply not convincing if the writer cannot fully explain its relevance.
- While students should be able to identify techniques, it is more important that they understand how and why such techniques work and that they are able to employ these devices in the service of their own writing. It doesn’t matter, for example, whether the student refers to a technique as anaphora or repetition; what matters is the depth of the student’s explanation of how the technique works in a specific situation.
- Sometimes the holy trinity of stylistic analysis (imagery, diction, syntax) helps a reader sort out how a writer has accomplished his effect. Often it does not. Students need training in deciphering what is important within the context of the work as a whole and especially with regard to the general thrust of the writing.
- We need to provide students with opportunities to write about their own experiences so that they know how to present personal experiences as relevant and appropriate evidence.
- While such structures as the five-paragraph essay may be useful when introducing students to the writing process, these programmatic structures are inappropriate for continued use in a college-level composition course. We need to encourage students to move beyond the predictable and pedestrian in their thinking and writing. College-level writing requires that students employ organic methods of organization that are directly related to their essay’s rhetorical situation, purpose, content, and audience. While the five-paragraph response may work quite well in answering examination questions and can give a semblance of organization, it frequently leads students to a number of problems: redundancy, the invention of three points of discussion when the student clearly has only two strong ideas, the omission of a necessary fourth because it does not fit the magical number of 3, or a lack of individual voice, among others. Following formulaic structures can certainly help students learn to write commentary and opinion which is a first step toward analysis, but these models often produce thesis statements that are too broad, general, or obvious. Insisting on the use of these structural methods often produces students who focus on the formula and ignore much more salient issues, and such methods imply that writing well is a

generic prescription rather than a creative process of selecting and blending. Such methods lead students to belabor the obvious and can be particularly difficult to adapt for writing in specific modes, such as the personal essay or letter. They often become a pair of training wheels that students refuse to remove because they are afraid to rely upon their sense of balance or because using the wheels seems easier. Those of us who teach college-level composition often find that teaching students to forsake such methods can be as difficult as convincing them to use the word “I” in an essay. We are often forced to devote too much time in composition courses to “unteaching” such carefully memorized rules and programs.

- We need to continue to encourage students to develop their own voice, to risk making their own perceptive claims, and to create their own organic structures. We should focus on creating an atmosphere in which taking such risks is not only acceptable but also preferable. We want our students to understand that the flawed “something” is almost always preferable to the well-wrought “nothing.”