



Student Performance Q&A: 2004 AP[®] English Literature & Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2004 free-response questions for AP[®] English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Gale K. Larson of California State University, Northridge. 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?

The poetry question this year asked students to read two poems: one by Emily Dickinson, “We grow accustomed to the Dark,” and the other by Robert Frost, “Acquainted with the Night.” Students were asked to compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing the significance of dark and night in each. Further, they were asked to analyze such elements as point of view, imagery, and structure. The purpose of this question was to test students’ analytical and interpretive skills by asking them to identify similarities and differences between two rather challenging poems and to compare each poet’s use of techniques like point of view, imagery, and structure in noting nuances of meaning in the two poems. The task required a high level of critical thinking.

To answer this and the other essay questions on the exam, students needed to possess excellent writing skills; that is, they needed to be able to organize their ideas in a coherent and clear manner, to use precise diction, to support their ideas with apt references to the text itself, and to have a good command of standard written English. Students were expected to have mastered the finer points of writing college-level analytical essays.

How well did students perform on this question?

Generally speaking, this year’s students seemed well prepared to answer the poetry question. Students wrote longer, though not necessarily better, essays for this question than they did for the other two questions. Since past exams have presented a pair of poems, students should have been well prepared to compose comparison and contrast essays. They needed to read the two poems carefully in order to organize their thoughts, not only about the similarities and differences between

the two poems, but also about how each poem's point of view, imagery, and structure informed those differences and similarities.

As was the case last year, one of the poems proved more accessible than the other. Last year it was the Stevenson poem "Eros" that was more accessible to students; this year, rather surprisingly, it was the Dickinson poem. I say "surprisingly" because the Frost poem is more commonly taught in AP courses. Students could follow the development of the ideas of the Dickinson poem on its literal level, and they could understand its more optimistic conclusion. What they often failed to do was to go beyond the literal interpretation of "dark" to comprehend the deeper significance of the imagery. In other words, what was frequently missing from students' responses was a deeper awareness of how the imagery was structured to move from the physical world to the metaphysical world. Students wrote more commentary on the Dickinson poem, often paraphrasing its literal meaning, and then wrote less on or even slighted the Frost poem. They seemed not to be able to grasp the tone of the Frost poem as a means to understanding its darker imagery and the subtle ambiguity of the speaker's feelings of pensiveness, bordering on depression.

This year's poetry question had the highest adjusted mean score among the three questions; last year it had the second highest of the three. This year the adjusted mean score for the poetry question was 4.6 out of a possible nine points, which is the same as last year's adjusted mean score, as opposed to the more typical adjusted mean score in 2002 of 4.4 out of a possible nine points. In 2004 and 2003 students were asked to compare and contrast two poems, while in 2002 they were asked to analyze a single poem, Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain."

What were common student errors or omissions?

The question was, as this year's Readers acknowledged, an excellent AP Exam question and one that permitted the more able students to soar. The less able students fell into the obvious traps. They addressed the techniques of poetry, especially point of view, imagery, and structure, with varying degrees of success. More often than not their discussions of these elements were not connected to the meaning of the poems. They wrote at length on poetic structure and rhyme scheme as though those elements had nothing to do with informing the meaning of the two poems under discussion. They were frequently confused about point of view and what actually determines the central perspective of the poems. They discussed the structure of each poem for its own sake without connecting that discussion to the poems' meaning, the central concern of poetry analysis.

I believe that teachers need to teach the language of poetry, but at the same time they should stress that these elements must not be isolated from their connection to the meaning of the poems. More and more Readers are suggesting that the listing of poetic devices be dropped from future AP Exam questions because too many students end up discussing those elements for their own sake. Instead, the elements of poetry are to be used as analytical tools for unpacking the meaning of poetry.

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?

Each year I ask the Readers to respond to a questionnaire about what teachers should concentrate on as they prepare their students for the exam. Over the past four years that I have served as Chief Reader, I have received much the same responses. I will summarize them here.

- Focus on critical thinking and on how literary analysis must build a cohesive argument about how technique supports meaning.
- Teach the technical details of poetry (e.g., meter and rhyme scheme) but always connect

them with tone and/or theme. Lists of terms are meaningless, as well as often inaccurate, when not linked to the specifics of the poem.

- Continue to provide more training in poetry analysis and draw upon the similarities and differences between the poems under study.
- Help students discover a thesis in their analysis of poetry as a means to organize and focus their responses.
- At all grade levels in high school, teach poetry as poetry. Students can navigate their way through poems if they are shown what to look for, if they read a lot of poetry, and if they are empowered by the understanding of the “secret passwords” of figurative language.
- Remind students that they are writing formal essays and that addressing the poets by their first names is not appropriate.
- Tell students that mastering the literal level of any poem is only the first step of getting to its deeper meaning, and that the language of poetry (e.g., the use of irony, ambiguity, and imagery) can often get them started.
- Concentrate more on the message of the poem and then teach what makes that message work.
- Emphasize the development of ideas, focusing on the main points, and adhere to the essay structure.
- Remind students to read the entire prompt carefully and be sure to answer it fully.
- Teach students to analyze, to think, and to write about literature appropriately (e.g., use of the narrative present tense, precise terminology, and apt support from the text itself).
- Encourage students to read closely first and then apply literary terms later, always with the idea of connecting the terms to meaning.
- Keep having students explain the evidence they use in their essays. In other words, keep them clearly focused on the text itself.
- Develop within AP courses the practice of peer editing as a means of improving good reading and writing skills. Students need to work on more appropriate introductions and conclusions. Too many students repeat the prompt word for word and/or write fatuous conclusions.
- Teach students that discussions of meter and scansion are helpful only if they are connected to meaning.
- Assign some timed writing exercises that require students to write with as much thoroughness as 40 minutes will allow.
- Assign old prompts from previous exams and allow students to grade each other according to the scoring guidelines.
- Teach students the difference between “paraphrase” and “analysis.”
- Encourage students to focus on the “how” and “why” instead of the “what.”
- Emphasize the importance of pre-planning and outlining to allow the introduction and thesis statement to have substance that fits the rest of the essay.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Question 2, the prose question, asked students to read the opening passage from Henry James's "The Pupil" (1891) and then to write an essay in which they were to analyze the author's depiction of the three characters and the relationships among them. Further, they were asked to pay particular attention to tone and point of view. The purpose of the question was to engage students in a close reading of a rather sophisticated passage in order for them to understand the nuances and subtleties that, in this particular case, Henry James created among his three characters. This was an extremely difficult passage and one that challenged students' interpretive skills.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Henry James passage was not as accessible to this year's students as was the passage from Mavis Gallant's short story, "The Other Paris," which appeared on the 2003 AP Exam. The James passage was far more dense and complex, and his stylistic nuances were definitely a challenge to this year's students.

Many students attempted to define the three characters but misinterpreted their relationships and thus failed to penetrate the shades of language James used to characterize them and their relationships. More often than not, they were confused as to what their relationships were. Mrs. Moreen, for example, was often not recognized as a pretender to aristocracy, a pseudo-aristocrat. Students failed to catch the significance of the "soiled" gloves. In other words, they failed to go beyond basic character descriptions, missed much of the subtle irony of the piece, and often neglected to discuss what their relationships were. Many students could not coherently discuss how the author used tone and point of view to control the reader's understanding of the passage. They were not familiar with tone as a literary technique, often confusing the author's attitude or tone with the character's feelings. Far too many students simply said that James used tone but without having any understanding of what that meant; they stopped at mere naming instead of explaining.

The one character that seemed to be misunderstood the most was Morgan Moreen. He was often dismissed as just a brat. Students failed to see him as the one character depicted by James who was most sensitive to what was really going on in the interview. The ironic subtlety behind Morgan's "Oh, la-la" went unnoticed by students. It is true, however, that there is very little in the excerpt that reveals the subtler shades of his character and that readers must read beyond this particular passage to begin to capture his true character and the extent of his sensibilities. Also, many students misconstrued Pemberton's reaction to Morgan. They often adopted a highly reductive reading of the passage, for instance, construing "poor" as a financial term rather than an indicator of narrative tone. Although the clues to focus on the tone and point of view may have discouraged paraphrase in some cases, few students seemed comfortable with these literary concepts. While many had a basic familiarity with the terms themselves, many had no idea of their implications in the James excerpt.

Readers of the prose question agreed that it was an excellent AP Exam question and allowed them to discriminate well among the student essays. Many Readers, however, were surprised by the number of blanks (no response) and the number of scores of 0, 1, and 2 they assigned to these essays. In 2002 and 2003 the adjusted mean score for the prose passage was 4.8 out of a possible nine points. The 2002 prose passage was from Alain de Botton's *Kiss and Tell* and the 2003 prose passage was from Mavis Gallant's "The Other Paris." Those prose passages, similar in content and

texture, were not as dense and complex as this year's passage from Henry James, which was indeed a challenge to students. The adjusted mean score of 4.3 out of a possible nine points attests to its difficulty.

Generally speaking, although the better essays may or may not have addressed the irony and may or may not have defined in detail the use of point of view or the function of tone, they all saw a degree of complexity in the passage, and most wrote about it in effective, controlled language.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many of the common errors and omissions made by this year's students in responding to the prose question are imbedded in what I have written above; however, I will list some of the particular errors and omissions that Readers have pointed out to me.

- Students' handling of the techniques of tone and point of view in their analyses of the passage was a mixed performance. Readers were confronted with every kind of point of view and a wide range of tones. There was the omniscient point of view in all of its limited and unlimited incarnations: first, second, and third person. Readers learned about third-person omnipotent, semi-limited, semi-omniscient, bystander, insider, and outsider. James's tone ranged from "serious" to "comic," "mysterious" to "snobby," and "distant" to "floaty." By and large, Readers were forgiving when it came to labels. They wanted students to tell *how* narration was handled much more than how to label it appropriately. Students who went beyond mere labeling were generally more effective in their analysis of the passage.
- Students who struggled to follow Pemberton's situation as he meets his new charge and tries to find out what Mrs. Moreen will pay him generally wrote lower-half papers, as was the case with those students who merely provided limited character portraits. These students often wrote a paragraph about each character and spent less time thinking about the characters in relation to each other.
- As has been pointed out before, students write best when they have some degree of emotional investment in the text. After reading a few hundred of these essays, the Readers were definitely aware that few students came to care overmuch about any of these characters. There were, however, those students who, in spite of such attitude, persisted, reading first for understanding and then for evidence to bolster their hypotheses; but they did so for the most part as a purely academic exercise.
- If there was one recurring criticism from the Readers of the prose question it was the failure of students to understand fully the meaning of "tone." Again, many students made reference to it but failed to expand upon it by alluding to appropriate passages within the text to support their ideas. The explication of tone in such a sophisticated passage as this one demanded a higher level of thinking, a closer reading of the text, and a sensitivity to a subtext. Students certainly need more training in close reading of a text that uses oblique and nuanced language and makes subtle social observations.
- As is true for all questions on the AP Exam, students must know the difference between paraphrase (plot summary) and analysis. They must learn how to develop an answer that responds to the question asked, provide supporting details for their ideas by making apt references to the text itself, and do so in a manner that demonstrates control of the aspects of good essay writing—not an easy task to be accomplished in approximately 40 minutes!

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?

I know there are many teachers who, in their attempt to capture their students' interest, choose texts that are more in keeping with their students' sensibilities. A writer of the depth and complexity of Henry James is often a roadblock to student interest. But getting students to engage in subtleties of language like those found in "The Pupil" is often quite rewarding when they rise to the challenge. Including in an AP course works by writers like Shakespeare, Shaw, Stoppard, James, Faulkner, Melville, Morrison, Marquez, and many others of similar stature, for the purpose of analyzing how the language of literature can help unpack meaning, can be extremely rewarding for students, who can be trained to engage their academic sensibilities before finding that their emotional sensibilities have been engaged.

Let me list a few remarks many of the Readers made in responding to a question like this one.

- Teachers should definitely teach tone, always asking students to show how it is achieved and how it contributes to a work's overall effect.
- Be sure to inform students that it is more important to say impressive things than it is to sound impressive.
- Be sure that students read the prompt carefully, respond thoroughly, use precise language, and avoid flabby introductions.
- There should be less reader response and more analysis of the text.
- Teach students to read a text more closely and more carefully (e.g., Morgan is not a female, although many students gave him a sex change).
- Explain what is meant by "textual analysis."
- Teach students how to write in paragraphs and how to support the claims they make; then have them go back to see if they have answered the prompt completely.
- Go beyond the "what" and tackle the "so what."
- Teach and model techniques of close and active reading.
- For the essay, teach students to avoid inane, trite, and generic introductions. They should begin with a thesis, avoid overuse of the passive voice, avoid unnecessary words, conclude with a closing sentence or two (ideally a rephrase of the thesis), and make the organization of ideas clear by using transitions. They should be aware that they are indeed writing to an audience.
- Have students practice writing AP Exam essays in class. Have them write on sample questions that are timed. Place them in small groups where they can read and grade each other's responses according to the scoring guidelines and compare the results with the rest of the class.
- Teach point of view in a more structured manner.
- Remind students that plot summary is fine as long as it serves to assist analysis. Plot summary without analysis will only result in lower-half scores.

As long as you demand from your students essays that address the topic thoroughly and thoughtfully, and that stay focused on the text itself with appropriate references to it, I cannot imagine you not succeeding with your students on future AP Exams

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Question 3, the open question, asked students to read a quotation from Roland Barthes, “Literature is the question minus the answer.” Then they were told to choose a novel or play and, considering Barthes’s observation, to “write an essay in which you analyze a central question the work raises and the extent to which it offers any answers. Explain how the author’s treatment of this question affects your understanding of the work as a whole.” Students were advised to “avoid mere plot summary.”

The intent of this question was to test students’ ability to think thematically about a novel or play they have studied and to write cogently and coherently about it. Not only were students asked to think about aspects of plot development, but they were further asked to speculate about how that particular situation contributed to their understanding of the work as a whole. The connection between plot construction and its larger thematic implications is typical of the kind of literary question AP students are expected to be able to answer.

This is one section of the AP Exam for which students should be somewhat more prepared. They have studied many works of literature and in the process should have become quite familiar with a choice few about which they are prepared to write. It is, of course, important that they select a novel or play that is appropriate to the question that has been asked; indeed, selecting a suitable choice of work is the first step to writing a successful essay.

How well did students perform on this question?

Most of the Readers of this question liked it for its openness and believed that it was a question that certainly separated the more able students from the less able; but it did so because of the ambiguity that is implicit in the question itself. Some students focused too heavily on the Barthes quote and were led astray, thinking that they had to select a work that offered no answers; however, most students recognized that the quote from Barthes was there to introduce the concept of a work’s central question, its treatment by the author, and the implications of that treatment for the reader’s understanding of the work as a whole. Most students did indeed recognize that they were being asked to select a novel or play in which a central question was raised and then to analyze it in terms of thematic perspectives that impinge on the work as a whole. These students could step back and discuss the larger, overarching, philosophical inquiries that the question called for. The less-prepared students, unfortunately, got bogged down with trivial, plot-driven questions that had little or no effect on the work as a whole.

I think that the use of the term “central question” did need more direction within the prompt; however, I also thought that, in tying it to the work as a whole, students would go beyond mere plot-driven questions and attempt to formulate questions of theme, inquiry, ambiguity, complexity, depth, and so on. Instead, the questions were often too literal, simplistic, plot related, and narrow in focus, and they were often undeveloped, underdeveloped, or incoherent.

Many Readers believed that this year’s open question was far more accessible to students than last year’s open question on tragic vision. It also opened the range of novels and plays that students could select for their answers. However, this year’s and last year’s data suggest that both questions

were equally difficult for most students. The adjusted mean score for both questions was 4.4 out of a possible nine points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

For two years in a row, the open question has asked students to select particular details of a novel or play and then to discuss how those details are significant to the work as a whole. Too many students either did not address all aspects of the question or neglected to address the larger issue of the question. For example, many students failed to formulate a universal thematic concept that addressed the work as a whole and instead engaged in such trivial plot questions as “Who is Kurtz?” “Did Desdemona cheat?” “Why does Hester Prynne commit adultery?” “What will happen to the protagonist?” or “Why does Hamlet delay?” It seemed that what distinguished the upper-half papers in this year’s open question was the quality of the question the student believed the author raised and the student’s ability to discuss or not to discuss its larger implications.

The language of the question itself may have elicited many personal anecdotes from students; that is, the use of “you” and “your understanding” may have prompted students who have been trained in reader response to interject personal accounts of their lives. Unfortunately, many of these personal accounts were trivial and far too tangential to the work they were analyzing. Whether eliminating the “you” and “your” references would have steered students away from such an approach is merely speculative.

While many Readers believed that students seemed to have performed better on this year’s open question, they expressed similar criticisms; namely, that far too many students, in spite of the caveat to avoid mere plot summary, again failed to follow that sage advice. It is patently clear to me that teachers must teach and students must hear that there is a difference between “paraphrase” and “analysis” and that paraphrase is only valid when it is at the service of analysis.

I suspect the most flagrant error of students on this year’s open question was their inability to even pose a question of significance. And there were those students who thought the question meant “what if.” What if, they pondered, Oedipus had never left Corinth? What if Jake had not had a wound? What if Hamlet had killed Claudius when he clearly had the opportunity? Such questions did not allow students to soar in their responses. Many students, of course, could pose significant questions and did indeed impress Readers with their literary acumen. For example, some recognized that the more interesting question in *The Great Gatsby* is not whether money buys happiness or whether the American Dream is attainable, but whether we can recapture the past.

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?

I believe that this year’s question should inspire teachers to engage their students in both isolating significant questions posed by the authors that students read and in discussing the implications of those questions. Such an exercise should make it clear to students that there are no right or wrong answers, but that there are answers that are ambiguous, complex, mysterious, mystical, philosophical, social, theological, you name it—and oftentimes, no answers at all, just speculations.

Teachers should remind their students that they will be addressing questions that require a careful reading of a novel or play. They should know in detail the plot, the characters, and the major themes in the work. Students usually know what happens in a work of literature but rarely why and for what purpose. Teach these concepts. They should also be familiar with the language of literature. Such familiarity should cover many works, so that when students confront the open

question on the AP Exam, the question itself will suggest a novel or play that will fit the question well. Readers can readily detect canned responses.

Here are a few suggestions from Readers of the open question.

- Do not parrot the prompt as a thesis.
- Work carefully on each level of writing — word, sentence, paragraph, essay — and direct students to a higher level of thinking skills.
- Remind students to couple an abstract idea with a concrete example.
- Teach works in depth. Do not let students be satisfied with superficial analyses.
- Continue to stress the planning stages of the writing process.
- Help students embrace ambiguity in literature.
- Have students write under the gun, but demand clarity and thoughtfulness.
- Teach students how to analyze, how to support an assertion, how to respond to the prompt, and how to follow directions.
- Do not suggest that any one work will fit all questions on the open section of the exam.
- Provide students with a better grounding in thematic analysis.
- Do not oversimplify a work's meaning by telling students that the work is about one finite phase of life; for example, that *Heart of Darkness* is about imperialism, *The Scarlet Letter* is about social rejection and repentance, *Death of a Salesman* is about the importance of being well liked, and *The Great Gatsby* is about money not buying happiness. Such a reduction of a work's meaning often becomes the memorized summary statement of a student who has been left with a cursory and paltry understanding of that work.
- Point out that students should use one play or novel to answer the question, and that their choice of work should not be a short story, film, comic book, or young adult literature of questionable merit.
- Teach students to read closely, to think deeply, and to write analytically.

Let me add that if you follow the advice given in this last suggestion, you will introduce your students to the expectations of college-level writing, the very foundation of an AP English course. AP English teachers are doing a fine job—the suggestions above are given primarily to keep you focused on the matters that make for better AP English courses and better results on the AP Exam.

Note: I want to thank all of the Readers who participated in this year's AP Reading, as well as those who have worked with me over the past four years, for helping me guide the scoring of the AP English Literature and Composition Exam. I recognize what a dedicated group you are and how fortunate I have been to work with you. I encourage those of you who have not participated in a Reading to get involved in the AP Program either through AP Central® (apcentral.collegeboard.com) or AP workshops and conferences, or by becoming a Reader. *Ave atque vale!*