



Student Performance Q&A:

2013 AP® English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2013 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 “The Black Walnut Tree” by contemporary American poet Mary Oliver and to write a well-organized essay analyzing how figurative language and other poetic techniques help Oliver convey her ideas about the relationship between the tree and the family.

With a continued emphasis on devices and techniques as a means of conveying meaning, the question was designed to help students examine ideas and their relationships, as well as how those ideas and the relationships between them are conveyed to the reader. While the beginning of the poem focuses on the relationship between a mother and daughter and a particular black walnut tree, the poem’s meaning broadens to include how the particular family views itself against the backdrop of its heritage and the sacrifices made by “the fathers” to cultivate the land and develop roots in America. Imagery is one form of figurative language that students readily cited, and many of them discussed a number of other poetic techniques in their essays.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.21 out of a possible 9 points. This was a healthy rebound over last year’s rather dismal mean score of 3.98 (the lowest mean score on the poetry exam in the last nine years). While the mean score for 2013 is a nice improvement, it still confirms the fact that many students face a real challenge when presented with the poetry prompt. While this year’s poem, a contemporary, free verse poem by an American poet, did not draw anywhere near the number of blank responses as did last year’s sixteenth-century sonnet, students generally do not perform as well on the poetry question as they do on the other, more prose-oriented questions.

Responses that earned upper-half scores often were characterized by an amazing insight, depth, and control that reflected these student writers' understanding of the complexity of the poem. Lower-half essays tended toward a simplistic summary; moreover, these student writers did not see the complexity in the poem and missed the shift in the poem altogether.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students are generally not able to write persuasively about poetry in language appropriate to the genre. For example, while many students found Oliver's "The Black Walnut Tree" accessible, they often could not discuss common elements of poetry like rhyme, rhythm, form, and meter. Furthermore, many students tried to apply rhetorical strategies from the AP English Language Exam, i.e., ethos, pathos, and logos, rather than choosing more appropriate poetic devices to demonstrate their understanding of the craft and meaning of the particular poem. As with previous poems, students often provided a list of devices but presented little insight with their listing of the various devices; thus, the responses tended to be device-driven rather than insight-driven.

Students also tended to oversimplify the poem as merely a debate between a mother and daughter over whether or not to cut down the walnut tree and sell the wood for money to pay the mortgage. They did not see, or ignored altogether, the shift in the poem that gives it its richness and complexity. Also, many students often misread the latter part of the poem and presupposed that the reference was to the father of the family rather than "fathers" of the larger family of immigrants. This oversight or misreading again kept students from appreciating the complexity offered by the poem.

By far the most common problem with this year's responses—and this is not significantly different from previous years—is that students do not differentiate between summary/paraphrase and analysis. One Reader termed this the "So What?" factor: students are often able to say "what," but they cannot, or do not, go the necessary distance to say "why" and "toward what end."

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Given the perennial difficulty students exhibit when dealing with the poetry question, teachers might spend more time teaching poetry, especially its various elements. The following suggestions may be beneficial:

- Help students not only identify poetic devices, but also connect them with meaning. This will help students avoid writing essays that are device-driven rather than insight-driven.
- Emphasize the teaching of language appropriate to the analysis of poetry. For many students, poetic language is almost like a foreign language. More opportunities to practice using poetic language in the service of poetry analysis will surely increase students' ability to deliver a fully competent analysis of a poem or poems.
- Help students see the difference between summary/paraphrase and analysis. Superficiality is another perennial problem with student essays on the AP Exam. More opportunities to dig for details and textual support will no doubt strengthen students' ability to provide analysis.
- Provide students with more opportunities to practice identifying complex "both/and" attitudes. In the case of "The Black Walnut Tree," many students simply missed the complexity of the poem signaled by the shift midway through the poem. Helping students move beyond simplistic appraisals of poetry will boost students' ability and confidence in writing about poetry.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to carefully read a passage from D. H. Lawrence's early-20th-century novel *The Rainbow* (1915) and to write an essay analyzing how Lawrence employs literary devices to characterize the woman and capture her situation.

Students were prompted to focus on the female character in the passage as she begins to come into a new stage of self-awareness and to analyze how the author uses literary devices to characterize her. Further, students were invited to analyze how literary devices were employed by the author to capture the woman's situation as depicted in the passage. The question was designed to assess students' ability to read closely for detail and nuance and to choose for analysis appropriate literary devices employed by the author as vehicles to convey the character and her situation. Because no particular device was specified, students were presented with the additional important task of identifying literary devices and then analyzing how they are used.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.39 out of a possible 9 points.

Many students found the prompt and the passage accessible, and while no list of suggested devices was provided in this year's prompt, many students seemed comfortable with the language and terms of literary devices and were able to apply them to the passage. Those responses scoring in the upper half were often sophisticated discussions of the complexity in the woman's character and her situation. Those responses falling in the lower half of the scoring range were often characterized by misinterpretation, as students were unable to identify clearly which parts of the passage were important or explain how the parts functioned as a whole.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common shortcoming was that students did not distinguish between summary and analysis. As they do in the poetry question responses, students can often get to the "what" but cannot, or do not, take the necessary steps forward to address the "why" or discuss the results or outcomes. Also, students who wrote weaker essays attempted to make major points with less apt choices of literary devices, like alliteration, and struggled to show how such a device might work in the prose passage. Many student writers also struggled with the complex and implicit language and prose style employed by Lawrence in his characterization of the woman and her situation. Likewise, many students had great difficulty reading and accessing a work that is somewhat distant historically and culturally from their own experience.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP[®] Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Students writing about prose are often challenged when the author moves from the more common forms of characterization like physical description and dialogue to more complex and implicit devices. The following suggestions may prove beneficial:

- Teach students how to analyze, that is, help them identify important constituent parts of the prose passage and use those pieces to create a unified interpretation of the passage.
- Teach students to understand complexity in prose works, especially in character analysis. Using something as simple as a template may help students move from a single, oversimplified focus on

one trait. For example, “The woman is characterized not only by _____ but also by _____” might be a helpful way to invite students to explore other elements of character and situation that might not be readily apparent.

- Work with prewriting so that students arrive at a thesis before engaging a long passage. Students tend to begin writing without reading the passage carefully for the insights it might yield under close examination.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

Students were asked to choose a single pivotal moment in the psychological or moral development of the protagonist in a *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, and then write a well-organized essay that analyzed how that single moment shapes the meaning of the work as a whole.

The question was designed to challenge students to confront the complexities of a *bildungsroman* by first focusing on a single pivotal moment and then analyzing how that moment figures in shaping the meaning of the entire novel. Students were directed away from plot summary by having to focus on a single moment, and they were challenged to think in broad and complex ways about how a single moment affects the larger work. This question is the “open question,” and, accordingly, students were invited to select a *bildungsroman* from a list of works supplied with the question, or they could select another work of comparable literary merit for their analysis.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.61 out of a possible 9 points.

Students typically perform better on the “open” question than on the poetry or prose prompts, and that is the case again with performance on this year’s exam, although the mean score is somewhat lower than last year’s. That is likely because the prompt is slightly more difficult and rather more restricted than last year’s. Even so, students, for the most part, fully understood the definition of *bildungsroman* and the focus on the transition from youth to maturity. Students wrote on a wide variety of texts (nearly 400), and those responses that earned upper-half scores demonstrated a high level of depth and sophistication in their analyses. Responses that earned lower scores tended to overgeneralize the novel they had read, and although they were able to summarize the plot in broad strokes, they could not provide adequate detail or textual support to demonstrate that they understand analysis.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students simply did not respond to the actual prompt; rather, they simply narrated a summary of what happened in the novel. This summary, coupled with a lack of focus on pertinent details and textual support, often yielded essays that were at best superficial. Furthermore, many students were unable to express the novel’s meaning without resorting to simplistic contraries, like “man vs. nature,” or mere platitudes, such as “look before you leap.” Such hackneyed and overused phrases prohibited students from probing the novel for its complexities.

In focusing on the pivotal moment, some students did not root the impact of that moment in relevant details that occurred earlier or later in the text; instead, they discussed only the moment itself. Also, students were mostly unable to comprehend the subtlety of the word “moment” and chose instead an event that was a turning point in the plot.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Because students can prepare ahead of time for the open question, teachers should assist them in a careful preparation for the task that can be both rewarding and enjoyable, even under exam pressures. The following suggestions may be helpful:

- Discourage students from simply restating the prompt as their thesis. Students who find their own entrée into the prompt by constructing their own thesis tend to demonstrate a certain ownership of the work and thus deliver a more confident analysis.
- Teach the close reading of a few novels and plays rather than a cursory reading of many works. The extra time spent with fewer works will help students appreciate the depth and complexity of those works, and their ability to probe for deeper meaning will likely yield more substantive, less superficial analyses.
- Help students strategize for the open-ended question. While students come to the exam with a general sense of the novel or play, they need additional instruction on how to focus on the pertinent, important elements of the work. At a minimum, students should be conversant with the characters (including their names), places, major themes, and other devices that the author uses to construct the novel or play.
- Provide as much opportunity as possible for students to practice differentiating summary from analysis.