

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2019 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	380,136		
• Number of Readers	977		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	23,508	6.2
	4	59,648	15.7
	3	105,635	27.8
	2	130,358	34.3
	1	60,987	16.0
• Global Mean	2.62		

The following comments on the 2019 free-response questions for AP[®] English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David Miller of Mississippi College, assisted by Question Leaders Esther Jones Cowan, Eric Bishop, and Charles Toombs. 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 preparation 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**Task:** Poetry Analysis**Topic:** P.K. Page, “The Landlady”**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.15***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

For Question 1, the poetry analysis question, students were asked to read P. K. Page’s poem “The Landlady” and respond to the following prompt:

Carefully read P. K. Page’s 1943 poem “The Landlady.” Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the speaker’s complex portrayal of the landlady. You may wish to consider such elements as imagery, selection of detail, and tone.

Students were expected to complete three tasks successfully:

- They were expected to read carefully.
- They were expected to analyze the speaker’s complex portrayal of the landlady.
- They were expected to write a well-organized essay based on that analysis.

To clarify how these key terms are being used, their definitions are reiterated here (as they were last year).

- **Reading** carefully means employing the techniques practiced during the AP English Literature and Composition class and engaging with qualities, terms, and characteristics related to the study of poetry. Reading, in this context, implies the attempt to discover or create meaning (to interpret) based on the cues of the prompt.
- **Analyzing** means identifying the important parts of a larger whole and being able to explain how those parts connect to and function within that whole. In this case, students needed to identify the parts of the poem that led to an understanding of the speaker’s complex portrayal of a character, the landlady. The word “complex” here is a cue to the students that they might see contradictory, shifting, paradoxical, or even opposing elements of that portrayal. Strong responses articulated *how* the poet portrayed those relationships.
- **Writing** a well-organized essay means understanding how students’ own thoughts about the text are connected; being able to support those assertions with clear, concrete examples; and cueing the reader with the appropriate compositional techniques, such as establishing an assertive, defensible thesis and using transitional devices to reveal how ideas are connected. It should be noted that students are not expected in the free-response section of the examination to write a polished, revised essay. Instead, the organization may be implicit throughout and may be understood by claims formed late in the essay. The essay should, however, enable the readers to see and to follow the student’s reasoning (even if that reasoning is still developing).

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Overall, responses were strong. Most responses indicated the students found the poem in both structure and content accessible, but not overly familiar. They found different entry points for relatively successful discussions and analyses, resulting in confident efforts to respond to and interpret the poem in a variety of ways. For example, many responses focused on the landlady’s “creepiness” or labeled her behavior as “stalking.” Many, however, also analyzed the text for potential motivations of the landlady or the conflicting responses of her tenants. That textual analysis often revealed varying levels of complexity in the responses.

Students also seem to have understood both the prompt and the need to try to formulate their ideas into a coherent essay-like structure, even if they did not always deliver a coherent or cohesive argument. Most provided some textual evidence that the landlady was “prying” or “snooping.” Very few had difficulty correctly identifying at least one literary element in the poem.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students had difficulty identifying specific elements within the poem to use for effective interpretation. (reading, analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Because of her stalkerish behavior, her boarders’ lives become ‘exact’ and ‘designed’ so that they can avoid her, further preventing her from knowing their true natures. She sees the boarders through a ‘sepia’ hue through her ‘camera eye,’ meaning everything she knows about them is simply a photograph. She only has still images with which to characterize her boarders.” “Page also uses diction to represent how diligently this woman tries to learn more about the boarders, using words like ‘unlocks,’ ‘searches,’ and ‘pricks.’ Each of these words convey [<i>sic</i>] a certain sense of urgency and give the impression that the landlady cares and ‘wonders’ about what is happening in their lives.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students had difficulty moving from commentary (point by point observations) to more cohesive claims. (reading, analysis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “In lines 7–8, the speaker notes how her ears ‘advance and fall back,’ like that of an animal. Typically, the idea of the image of an animal with their ears perked tends to convey that the animal in question is intrigued by something they have heard—similarly, this image of the landlady’s ears moving in the same way allows us to infer that the lives of her tenants intrigue her to the point of creature-like curiosity.” “Specifically, in lines 21–24, when the speaker tells us she ‘knows them better than their closest friends,’ and then lists all the little ways in which she violates their privacy in her obsession [to] gather information on all of them, does the choice of detail really establish a sense of invasion of tenants’ privacy. Their drawers, cupboards, mail, books, <u>everything</u>, she encroaches upon, and listing every little thing emphasizes both the scale in which she works in, and the extent of her obsession.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students relied upon a single interpretive conclusion and did not explore complexity. (analysis, writing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The landlady is the example of a human being who overreaches in their moral authority, ultimately doing more harm to their own moral being than benefitting those of others.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “... the landlady is portrayed in a light that almost makes her seem malicious. This starkly contrasts the details which depicted a caring and interested person at other points during the poem. The landlady is complex because she knows more about her boarders than anyone else without ever actually knowing them at all.”
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Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers should continue to help their students with close reading by mirroring the process of discovery and thought development in class. Giving students previously unseen poetry to work with in class, asking them to identify potentially key elements, and helping them see both the conflicts and the complexities in those elements are essential to train them as readers of poetry. Teachers should initially worry less about paraphrasing a poem or asking students to relate to a particular work and should instead help students begin to approach poetry as they might any challenging text: by assuming meaning, by examining details of language and structure, and then by assembling those details to piece together potential interpretations. Ideally, teachers could find ways to “read” poems with their students and not just teach readings to their students. Allowing for such “messy readings” will be time consuming and will require teachers to relinquish some classroom and interpretive control, but it will ultimately help students to read poetry and other complex texts “in the wild.”

Teaching poetry is not about teaching a particular interpretation of a work, but rather, it is about teaching students how language works and helping them develop good analytic and interpretive reading skills so that they can make meaning, not just receive it.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

- Teachers will find example responses from this particular question on AP Central, along with scoring notes and specific commentary explaining why each point was or was not earned.
- The 2019 Course and Exam Description for English Literature includes a diverse collection of resources, including the Instructional Approaches section, as well as the Exam Overview section.
- FRQ practice questions for teachers to use as formative assessment are now available as part of the collection of new resources for teachers for the 2019 school year. These resources begin with scaffolded questions that represent what students are ready for at the beginning of the school year and present an increased challenge as teachers progress through the course. These resources are available on AP Classroom and include the feature that allows specific question types and topics to be searched to find the new collection of FRQ practice questions and their accompanying scoring guidelines.

Question #2**Task:** Prose Fiction
Analysis**Topic:** William Dean Howells, *The Rise
of Silas Lapham***Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.17***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

For Question 2, the prose analysis question, students were asked to read an excerpt from William Dean Howells' novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and respond to the following prompt:

Carefully read the following excerpt from William Dean Howells' novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Then, in a well-constructed essay, analyze how the author portrays the complex experience of two sisters, Penelope and Irene, within their family and society. You may wish to consider such literary elements as style, tone, and selection of detail.

The students were, once again, expected to accomplish three specific tasks:

- They were expected to read carefully.
- They were expected to analyze how the author portrays the complex experience of the two sisters.
- They were expected to write a well-constructed essay based on that analysis.

Again, the three tasks are interrelated and interdependent.

- **Reading** carefully means reading “closely,” employing the techniques practiced during students' Advanced Placement class and engaging with qualities, terms, and characteristics related to the study of prose. Reading in this way begins with the assumption of meaning, and students should, even at first reading, begin to pay attention to how particular features of the text begin to create an overall effect or meaning. It is worth noting that beginning with next year's examination, the prompts for poetry and prose analysis will not contain any suggested literary techniques for students to consider at the beginning of their analysis. Students are not required to name specific literary elements or terms, but knowledge of prose elements will help the student begin to analyze the text.
- **Analyzing** means identifying the important parts of a larger whole and being able to explain how those parts connect to and function within that whole. In this case, students needed to identify the way the author revealed the two sisters' complex experience. The prompt did not ask the students to be familiar with the nouveau riche experience in 19th-century America or to be aware of changing economic and gender contexts (although these do inform the novel as a whole). Instead, students were to identify how, in the given passage, the author, Howells, uses literary techniques to portray Penelope and Irene in this brief excerpt.
- **Writing** a well-constructed essay means controlling many features, including a defensible thesis, full development and textual support for ideas, clear connections and transitions that help cue the reader, and an attention to the standard conventions of writing. Again, students are not expected in the free-response section of the examination to write a polished, revised essay. Instead, the organization may be implicit throughout and may be understood by claims formed late in the essay. The essay should, however, enable the readers to see and to follow the student's reasoning (even if that reasoning is still developing).

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Overall, students performed well on the expected tasks. Readers found that many students could read and understand the passage and could examine a wide variety of literary elements and techniques to analyze how Howells portrays the sisters. Students seemed especially able to delineate how the sisters related to their family, their society, and ultimately to each other, with many students noting how the two sisters, while initially nearly indistinguishable from each other, did, in fact, emerge as separate characters, albeit still within an isolating family structure.

Some students discovered humor in the passage and explained how Howells' tone highlighted both the failures and successes of the sisters. Some students also incorporated the various shifts in the passage (especially the mention of the effect of Irene's suitor near the end) to highlight the developing complexity of the sisters' experiences. One twenty-year Reading veteran commented at the end of the Reading: “This year's students produced the best responses I can

remember. Many papers were complete, organized and tended to the various demands of the question with a complexity we have not seen in recent memory.”

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<p>Students focused on what the experiences were instead of analyzing how the author portrays their complexity. (analysis)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This central irony is developed through other details that Howell carefully includes: it is described how the girls attend a fashionable dance school, and yet are separated from the other attendees by a ‘great gulf’ of social class (line 24). Now, the reader notes, all the frivolities previously described, which seem to create the image of two upper-class sisters, are called into question. This contrast highlights the irony of the girls’ situation as well, and their naïveté is also cast into light as they are even suggested to be unaware of their social standing.” • “It is as the author’s tone becomes more curious, longing, thirsty for more, that the reader likewise recognizes a shift—Irene’s questions that surface towards the end of the excerpt suggest that there is more that she wants—perhaps more that her family is incapable of teaching her.”
<p>Students made individual claims about various parts of the text without offering an overall claim. (writing)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Howell’s close attention to detail through the entire excerpt does much to develop the complex experience of Irene and Penelope. Through its careful use, Howell masterfully creates a situation in which the plain irony is evident, but also one in which two complex characters—even if seemingly not so on the outside—are able to be created. While his use of contrasts in some instances is slightly comical—the reader is reminded of Howell’s remark on ‘church lectures on a variety of secular subjects,’ in general Howell’s skillful employment of details lends itself to great descriptive effect.”
<p>Students had difficulty reading details of the text, confusing characters’ names, situations, or misunderstanding narration. (reading)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Seeming opposites, Penelope and Irene don’t have the same thoughts about society. While Irene ‘dressed herself very stylishly,’ her sister (Penelope) ‘had a simpler taste.’ Penelope never went out of her way to impress somebody ... Penelope, the older daughter was more concerned with learning at ‘church lectures.’”

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Readers pointed out that many of the responses for Question 2 this year did pay attention to the idea of “complexity” as a way of understanding the two central characters. Teachers continue to explore the idea of “complexity” as an interpretive tool to help analyze challenging prose pieces. One way to do that is to encourage students to explore contradictory or paradoxical evidence in passages, characters, or situations and to not allow students to resolve or dissolve those elements too neatly or too quickly.

Teachers should also be encouraged to go deeply and spend time with excerpts instead of only focusing on sweeping novel-length developments. Short stories might be especially helpful here because they allow students and teachers to tackle close readings of “full length” works in a contained space. Linked short stories such as Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*, Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, or Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* could help students see how individual passages contribute to larger developments.

Finally, teachers should be encouraged to develop lessons that ask students to encounter some prose passages in “*medias res*,” without context, and allow them to work their way toward some conclusions, which they then could be asked to defend on the basis of the text. With those lessons, teachers should begin with the gathering of evidence (What details or elements do you think are important for an understanding of the characters in this passage?) and the categorizing of evidence (Why are these details or elements important and how do they relate to each other?), and only then move to an overarching claim that accounts for the apparent contradictions. That movement from reading to evidence to categories to claim is the reading experience most students have on the examination. The initial written responses, then, might not have an overall claim until the end or might see categories developing into paragraphs as the students discover ideas in writing. Ideally, the texts chosen for such lessons would be passages about which the teacher has not already formed a reading or interpretation, allowing the students and teacher to model the process of discovery, organization, and defense together.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

- Teachers will find example responses from this particular question on AP Central, along with scoring notes and specific commentary explaining why each point was or was not earned.
- The 2019 Course and Exam Description for English Literature includes a diverse collection of resources, including the Instructional Approaches section, as well as the Exam Overview section.
- FRQ practice questions for teachers to use as formative assessment are now available as part of the collection of new resources for teachers for the 2019 school year. These resources begin with scaffolded questions that represent what students are ready for at the beginning of the school year and present an increased challenge as teachers progress through the course. These resources are available on AP Classroom and include the feature that allows specific question types and topics to be searched to find the new collection of FRQ practice questions and their accompanying scoring guidelines.

Question #3**Task:** Literary
Argument**Topic:** Idealism and Its Consequences**Max. Points:** 9**Mean Score:** 4.52***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

For Question 3, the “open” question, students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

In his 2004 novel *Magic Seeds*, V. S. Naipaul writes: “It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world. That’s where the mischief starts. That’s where everything starts unravelling.”

Select a novel, play, or epic poem in which a character holds “an ideal view of the world.” Then write an essay in which you analyze the character’s idealism and its positive or negative consequences. Explain how the author’s portrayal of idealism illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.

You may choose a work from the list below or one of comparable literary merit. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Students were expected to complete three tasks successfully:

- They were expected to select an appropriate novel, play, or epic poem that contained a character with “an ideal view of the world.”
- They were expected to analyze the character’s idealism, its consequences, and how that idealism illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.
- They were expected to write an essay presenting their analysis and explanation.

As with the other two free-response questions, these tasks are interrelated and interdependent. Selection leads to analysis leads to writing; writing leads to further analysis and a deeper understanding of the selected text as a whole.

- **Selection** of a literary work that contains an appropriate character is crucial to success in Question 3. While no work or genre is automatically deemed to be “unworthy” of Question 3, some works can be limiting for the student. This can happen when the student chooses a work that is not sufficiently complex to support a well-developed essay, or the student chooses a work that is beyond their ability to manage. The issue of text selection was addressed in the 2018 Chief Reader Report and bears repeating: Selection of appropriate works should be an outgrowth of a student’s ability to read, identify, and understand complexity within a text and not simply the result of a list or single rule. No formal canon of “acceptable works” exists for Question 3. Helping students make good selections—that is, helping them understand what the criteria and judgment guidelines should be for them individually—should be part of individualized instruction. The list given is a suggested list for both students and teachers to consider and represents a widely diverse set of possibilities.
- **Analysis** in Question 3 usually has two parts (as it does this year): Students are asked to analyze the idealism of a character and its consequences, and they are asked to explain how that idealism contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. In the first part of the analysis they develop a specific claim about a character. In the second, they make a claim about a larger literary work. The analysis task, then, for Question 3, might be understood as being able to relate “parts” to a single whole (the character) and then relate that single whole to the larger whole (the work itself).
- **Writing** an essay means that students are asked to assemble evidence to support their defensible claim about the character’s idealism and its impact on the meaning of the work. Here, students need to select plot details carefully and make sure that they use them to serve the central thesis in clearly connected and explained ways. The organization may be implicit throughout and may be understood by claims formed late in the essay. The essay should, however, enable the readers to see and to follow the student’s reasoning (even if that reasoning is still developing).

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Generally, students found the prompt to be accessible and were able to use a wide variety of texts to develop their ideas. Many students were well prepared to discuss a particular character’s idealism—or at least general outlook on the world—with some degree of specificity. Locating general textual support, even by way of plot summary with implicit analysis, was also a fairly easy task for students. Some responses strayed from the concept of idealism into the concepts of “innocence” or naïveté or even “youth.” Readers read supportively where they could and allowed the students some latitude in their discussion of the concept.

Nuanced responses were able to draw on the Naipaul quotation to help find language or craft a critical lens through which to read a literary work. Even less adept responses identified both a character’s idealism and the consequences of such a view. In doing so these responses implicitly addressed the meaning of the work as whole in some fashion.

Students drew on their knowledge of texts to elaborate on both positive and negative consequences of a character’s idealism. They responded with fairly lengthy essays, as if the accessibility of the prompt invited participation. Some expressed their personal beliefs about idealism and, in the best essays, aptly allowed those beliefs to inflect their discussion of the meaning of the work as a whole.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<p>Students relied on plot summary instead of focusing more specifically on details or elements and explaining how these illustrate their points. (analysis, writing)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Holden Caulfield came from what would seem to anyone else a happy family, but Holden comes to explain a tragedy that occurred. His younger brother Allie died when he was still very young. His death took a toll on Holden. He thought that everyone had to grow up eventually, but his little brother never got to. Holden is at the point in his life where it is time for him to grow up. He is having a difficult time with this because he feels guilty that he gets the chance to grow up.” • “Sally refers to Bearing as ‘hun’ and ‘sweetheart,’ pet names that Vivian would not be caught dead before referred to as. But as time progresses and Vivian grows closer to her last breath, she accepts Sally’s sweetness, saying it is something that is necessary. As death nears, Vivian does not even wish to read and analyze John Donne’s dark poetry, she just wants to be reassured everything will be okay. It was not the time for metaphysical poetry. ‘Now is the time for, dare I say it, kindness.’”
<p>Students focused only on the consequences of idealism on the character, or, conversely, only focused on the work as a whole with no analysis of character. (writing)</p>	<p>“Throughout her novel, Morrison artfully turns a beloved figure on its head, proving the ugliness beneath its beauty. While symbols of sweethearts and blue eyes entice Pecola, they ultimately turn a community against her, and her against herself.”</p>

<p>Students relied on overly general, simplistic, or irrelevant statements about the meaning of the work as a whole and did not connect that meaning specifically to the prompt. (analysis, writing)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Antigone’s tragic tale serves to show the struggle between obedience to authority & obedience to her self. ... The harsh lesson learned from both the positive and negative consequences of Antigone’s ideal view of the world crafts a better ruler in Creon. Often in history, idealists are forward thinkers born before their times and, as a result, die as martyrs, but they are also catalysts for change. Antigone suffers the ultimate sacrifice, but the positive change in Creon is a lasting consequence for the better of the kingdom.” • “While the dog writhes on the ground, the reader sees the cost of Pecola’s quest for blue eyes. The white ideal has an immense capacity to destroy, as it does the dog and eventually Pecola herself. Pecola believes she has blue eyes, but has been completely rejected by her community. Impregnated by her own father, Pecola has been failed completely by society.”
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Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers should note that this is not a question about a single word: “idealism.” Instead, it is a question about the consequences of being idealistic. Moving away from the single word model will help students avoid the mistaken notion that a literary work can be summed up either in a single thought or a cliché. An interpretation should not be simplistically stated as a single word. For example, students should not be allowed to conclude that the theme of *Great Expectations* is “ambition” or the theme of *Macbeth* is “power.” In the same way, *The Great Gatsby* does not simply teach that “money can’t buy happiness.”

Teachers might model for students the ways readers define or create critical lenses from an abstract concept like idealism. Teachers should encourage students to see concepts in complex ways (as the prompt this year highlights). Teachers might get students to make clear assertions about how a concept or idea appears in a work—and then ask those same students to argue the opposite assertion instead. Such an activity does not suggest that “anything is possible”; instead, it is designed to help students to see contradictions and paradoxes in their own positions and anticipate the “naysaying” voices in an argument.

Finally, as I said last year in my report, teachers should continue to introduce diverse texts by diverse authors into their course. Encountering diverse texts can help students see complexities and can help them move beyond “relatability” into reasoned claims. Teachers should remember that reading diverse texts does not have to conclude with an “everyone is alike under the surface” over-simplification. Instead, diversity can be an end in itself, and recognizing differences and complexities in reading can be an objective.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

- Teachers will find example responses from this particular question on AP Central, along with scoring notes and specific commentary explaining why each point was or was not earned.
- The 2019 Course and Exam Description for English Literature includes a diverse collection of resources, including the Instructional Approaches section, as well as the Exam Overview section.

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