
AP[®] English Literature and Composition

Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentary Set 1

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Free-Response Question 2

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Question 2: Prose Fiction Analysis

6 points

The following excerpt is from Rachel Cusk’s novel *The Bradshaw Variations*, published in 2008. This passage describes Thomas Bradshaw’s morning interactions with members of his household. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Cusk uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
- Select and use evidence to support your line of reasoning.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
Row A Thesis (0–1 points)	0 points For any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no defensible thesis. The intended thesis only restates the prompt. The intended thesis provides a summary of the issue with no apparent or coherent claim. There is a thesis, but it does not respond to the prompt. 	1 point Responds to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation of the passage.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes	
	Responses that do not earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only restate the prompt. Make a generalized comment about the passage that doesn't respond to the prompt. Describe the passage or features of the passage rather than making a claim that requires a defense. 	Responses that earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a defensible interpretation of the complex portrayal of Thomas.
	Examples that do not earn this point: Restate the prompt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"Cusk uses Thomas's morning interactions with members of his household to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas."</i> Do not respond to the prompt but make a generalized comment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"Even in conversation with others, people often have their own unspoken thoughts."</i> Describe the passage or features of the passage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"In the passage, the reader can see what Thomas is thinking."</i> 	Examples that earn this point: Provide a defensible interpretation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"In this passage, Thomas is set up as someone who values authenticity, and his interactions with Olga demonstrate his struggles to live up to this value."</i> <i>"Cusk portrays Thomas as someone who tends to overanalyze things."</i> <i>"Although Thomas Bradshaw seems to have a rich inner life, the progress of the passage shows that he is quite unsure of himself. His abstract thinking creates distance between him and the people around him."</i>
Additional Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The thesis may be more than one sentence, provided the sentences are in close proximity. The thesis may be anywhere within the response. For a thesis to be defensible, the passage must include at least minimal evidence that <i>could</i> be used to support that thesis; however, the student need not cite that evidence to earn the thesis point. The thesis <i>may</i> establish a line of reasoning that structures the essay, but it needn't do so to earn the thesis point. A thesis that meets the criteria can be awarded the point whether or not the rest of the response successfully supports that line of reasoning. 		

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria				
Row B Evidence AND Commentary (0–4 points)	0 points Simply restates thesis (if present), repeats provided information, or offers information irrelevant to the prompt.	1 point EVIDENCE: Provides evidence that is mostly general. AND COMMENTARY: Summarizes the evidence but does not explain how the evidence supports the student’s argument.	2 points EVIDENCE: Provides some specific, relevant evidence. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence relates to the student’s argument, but no line of reasoning is established, or the line of reasoning is faulty.	3 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence supports a line of reasoning. AND Explains how at least one literary element or technique in the passage contributes to its meaning.	4 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Consistently explains how the evidence supports a line of reasoning. AND Explains how multiple literary elements or techniques in the passage contribute to its meaning.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes				
	Typical responses that earn 0 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are incoherent or do not address the prompt. May be just opinion with no textual references or references that are irrelevant. 	Typical responses that earn 1 point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tend to focus on overarching narrative developments or description of a passage rather than specific details or techniques. Mention literary elements, devices, or techniques with little or no explanation. 	Typical responses that earn 2 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consist of a mix of specific evidence and broad generalities. May contain some simplistic, inaccurate, or repetitive explanations that don’t strengthen the argument. May make one point well but either do not make multiple supporting claims or do not adequately support more than one claim. Do not explain the connections or progression between the student’s claims, so a line of reasoning is not clearly established. 	Typical responses that earn 3 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformly offer evidence to support claims. Focus on the importance of specific words and details from the passage to build an interpretation. Organize an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims. Commentary may fail to integrate some evidence or fail to support a key claim. 	Typical responses that earn 4 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformly offer evidence to support claims. Focus on the importance of specific words and details from the passage to build an interpretation. Organize and support an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims, each with adequate evidence that is clearly explained. Explain how the writer’s use of multiple literary techniques contributes to the student’s interpretation of the passage.
	Additional Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing that suffers from grammatical and/or mechanical errors that interfere with communication cannot earn the fourth point in this row. To earn the fourth point in this row, the response may observe multiple instances of the same literary element or technique if each instance further contributes to the meaning of the passage. 				

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
Row C Sophistication (0–1 points)	0 points Does not meet the criteria for one point.	1 point Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or develops a complex literary argument.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes	
	Responses that do not earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempt to contextualize their interpretation, but such attempts consist predominantly of sweeping generalizations (“<i>Human experiences always include ...</i>” OR “<i>In a world where ...</i>” OR “<i>Since the beginning of time ...</i>”). Only hint at or suggest other possible interpretations (“<i>While another reader may see ...</i>” OR “<i>Though the passage could be said to ...</i>”). Make a single statement about how an interpretation of the passage comments on something thematic without consistently maintaining that thematic interpretation. Oversimplify complexities in the passage. Use complicated or complex sentences or language that is ineffective because it does not enhance the student’s argument. 	Responses that earn this point may demonstrate a sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument by doing any of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and exploring complexities or tensions within the passage. Illuminating the student’s interpretation by situating it within a broader context. Accounting for alternative interpretations of the passage. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.
	Additional Note: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This point should be awarded only if the sophistication of thought or complex understanding is part of the student’s argument, not merely a phrase or reference. 	

In the excerpt from *The Bradshaw Variations* by Rachel Cusk, Thomas Bradshaw struggles through his morning routine and reflects on the authenticity of his own life. Although Thomas is able to complete his daily tasks as usual, he feels no engagement and purpose by completing them, and feels that he has become something artificial in his middle age. Through the use of contrast between Thomas' reality and his philosophical musings, similes, and lack of dialogue, Cusk develops Thomas as a man struggling to understand his place in the world as he ages.

Throughout the passage, the focus frequently shifts between Thomas' reflections on authenticity in a person and descriptions of his morning routine, revealing that his inner life is filled with considerably more strife than it may seem from an outside perspective, such as Olga's. In the beginning of the passage, Thomas declares that "it is easy to tell when something is artificial", but it is more difficult to determine authenticity. Through this statement, he is unknowingly comparing this reflection to his perspective on himself- is Thomas artificial or authentic? He is unsure, and attempts to work this out as he proceeds through his morning. The legion of mundane details of his life follow these thoughts, contrasting the deep inner life seen just before. His interaction with Olga is filled with mindless prattle such as her dentistry woes and complaints of medical costs, which he feels unable to respond to. As he turns up the music, he returns to his thoughts as quickly as he left them before, again wondering how he has become stuck in "limitless copies" of these meetings in the kitchen. Where a typical person could navigate this interaction with ease, Thomas struggles to step outside of his feeling of enclosure and repetition within his regular life. He furthers this perspective by attempting to compare himself with other events, trying to find solace in his painful experiences.

Cusk also uses similes within Thomas' story as he tries to make sense of the detached nature of his life. He at first feels like his is the "platform guard [waiting] for the London train to come through", the train being his wife's morning appearance in his morning rituals, but also the arrival of some purpose or meaning he feels he is waiting for. He briefly connects himself to Olga through this simile, believing her to be a "platform dweller" as well, perhaps due to her endless chatter with no real purpose, but still cannot connect the apathy he feels. When he returns to his thoughts, Thomas then describes the feeling inside him as "like decay" or "an inner force", as something that he cannot escape. He feels that no matter his choices, he is unable to escape the life he has made for himself and become able to respond to Olga's superfluous friendliness. Thomas' outlook on his future is overwhelmingly negative, as decay is inevitable and unpreventable, just as he believes his apathy is as well. His emotional state is further developed through the structure of the passage itself.

There is no dialogue within the passage -- save a reenactment of Olga's dramatics -- an intentional choice by Cusk to further alienate Thomas' perspective. The retelling of his morning events is quite objective, lacking the personality and humanity that telling the story through actual dialogue would provide. Thomas experiences his days like the structure of the passage, as though he was not being spoken to and was rather receiving the information "sealed behind glass". He fails to legitimately connect to the world around him, leading him to reflect again on the authenticity of his own being. He comes to the conclusion that he cannot be authentic due to the endless loop of his life, despite his possession of a cool exterior and solid form of a person. Through these contrasts, structural choices, and similes,

Cusk forms a complex portrayal of Thomas' inner life as a constant cycle of mundanity and his deep desire to get out of it, despite his acknowledgement he will never be able to do so.

In this excerpt from her book, *The Bradshaw Variations*, Rachel Cusk uses juxtaposition and imagery to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas as a man who values authenticity, ultimately pointing to the theme that to have a true relationship with someone, authenticity is needed.

Firstly, Cusk uses juxtaposition to characterize Thomas. For example, Cusk writes, "She has told Thomas that she is saving up for a bridge and a set of caps. She has three different jobs and all the money goes on her teeth," (par 3). In comparison, Cusk writes about Thomas, "When he talks to Olga he is both there and not there," (par 4). This contrast between Olga's stream of consciousness conversation and Thomas's half-listening helps to characterize Thomas as someone who isn't great at listening. Cusk later elaborates and describes that "there are, it seems, limitless copies of this conversation," and Thomas finds it difficult to truly listen and connect because the conversation "lacks authenticity". For Thomas, having the same conversation every morning is inauthentic, but the short minutes that his wife is in the kitchen, he "needs to be ready", indicating that he is expecting some sort of authenticity with their conversation, and expecting to get actual value from it. This is the major difference between Olga and Tonie for Thomas. His deep connection with Tonie stems from their authentic conversations and interactions together, which he does not have with Olga, so he can only develop a passing acquaintanceship with her.

Secondly, Cusk uses imagery to describe the feeling of disconnect Thomas feels with inauthentic things. For example, she writes, "He is as though sealed behind glass. He wonders if she realises this, realises that she can see but not touch him," (par 4). Olga cannot break through to Thomas in this conversation because he feels it is inauthentic. To Thomas, this is the same conversation happening every morning, and he is having difficulty reciprocating. Thomas understands this as a failure of his, and that is why he turns the music up, as a sort of penance for his failure to be reached. The authenticity of things matters deeply to Thomas, and it shows through his conversations with Olga. No matter how often they talk, he cannot develop an actual relationship like the one Thomas has with Tonie, because their morning conversations are inauthentic.

In conclusion, Cusk employs juxtaposition and imagery in order to characterize Thomas as someone who values authenticity, ultimately leading to the theme that authenticity is required for a true relationship.

Thomas can be understood as an open free thinker but hes also only held up on his own concerns. he has a renter that lives in his house that he talks to but never truely has a conversation with. He is only concerred on when his daughter and wife are going to come down stairs. He can be seen as an open thinker with his belife that art and real in person things like conversations can be authentic and artifical.

It shows how a person can be open and be closed at the same time. The conversation he has with thte renter is only about the renters teeth and he never asked any more questions. He repsponds with short answers while talking to her not relly showing interest. he only has one thing on his mind and thats his family. He even recongnizes the renters foot steps but at the same time he states that " He hears her tread and doesnt recognize it: that is how her identifiys her..". This can be understood that he knows its the lodger but she is not family to him so he never truley knows her.

He talks to the lodger but is thinking about his daughter and wife putting less effort into the conversation. It can be seen that hes trying to pass time while he waits for his true interests. He uses the metophor of a platform guard wating on the train so he will stand there for big chunks of time only hoping for one thing. He is almsrt portayed as a self centered man concerning his own needs before engagin with others fully.

When he gets annoyed or tired of the conversation with the lodger he turns up his music a little louder trying to giver her a hint that hes not interested. She does not recive the hint and keeps the conversation going. It is stated that the conversation never dies and when it starts to fade out it takes on a new form of the same material. For example Thomas states "There are, it seems, limitless copies of this conversation but it never goes anywhere or devlopes." It can be understood that he means there is no true relitivity or imortance in the conversations they have. Its just a time in his day that he fills meaninglessly waiting for his true wants and needs.

He is a complex man he engages with things that dont interest him but he half heartedly does. He will put up with a conversation with the lodger for copius amounts of time but they never mean anything to him. The text says " He could stand there for 100 years and still have much the same conversation with Olga". He reties the free thinking he has developed and says the conversations lack authenticy which he connected to art works at the beggining.

Question 2

Note: Student samples are quoted verbatim and may contain spelling and grammatical errors.

Overview

NEW for 2025: The question overviews can be found in the *Chief Reader Report on Student Responses* on [AP Central](#).

Sample: 2A

Score: 1-4-1

Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1

The essay responds to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation of the passage. The thesis, appearing as the last sentence of paragraph 1, states, “Through the use of contrast between Thomas’ reality and his philosophical musings, similes, and lack of dialogue, Cusk develops Thomas as a man struggling to understand his place in the world as he ages.” It earned 1 point in Row A.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 4

The essay provides specific evidence to support all claims in its line of reasoning that highlights Thomas’s struggle “to understand his place in the world as he ages” (paragraph 1). In paragraph 2, for example, the essay cites Thomas’s thought that “it is easy to tell when something is artificial.” This evidence is followed by commentary that explores Thomas’s perspective: “Through this statement, he is unknowingly comparing this reflection to his perspective on himself— is Thomas artificial or authentic? He is unsure, and attempts to work this out as he proceeds through his morning.” The essay then points out that “The legion of mundane details of his life follow these thoughts” as further evidence of Thomas’s struggle, and the commentary suggests these details contrast “the deep inner life seen just before.”

The essay also offers the image of Thomas being “stuck in ‘limitless copies’ of these meetings in the kitchen” and comments, “Where a typical person could navigate this interaction with ease, Thomas struggles to step outside of his feeling of enclosure and repetition within his regular life” (paragraph 2). Paragraph 3 examines similes in the passage and states, “He at first feels like his is the ‘platform guard [waiting] for the London train to come through’, the train being his wife’s morning appearance in his morning rituals, but also the arrival of some purpose or meaning he feels he is waiting for” as evidence of and commentary on Thomas’s struggle. The paragraph further offers as evidence that Thomas “briefly connects himself to Olga through this simile, believing her to be a ‘platform dweller’ as well” and comments that this is “perhaps due to her endless chatter with no real purpose,” and yet still he “cannot connect the apathy he feels” as more explanation of how Thomas is struggling to find authentic meaning in his life.

Paragraph 4 extends the analysis and points out that “There is no dialogue within the passage -- save a reenactment of Olga’s dramatics -- an intentional choice by Cusk to further alienate Thomas’ perspective” and that the “retelling of his morning events is quite objective.” This explanation of how a literary technique contributes to the meaning of the passage strengthens the argument in the response. The essay consists of specific, relevant evidence, cogent commentary, and insightful explanations of Cusk’s use of literary techniques that seamlessly blend to support the thesis. It earned 4 points in Row B.

Question 2 (continued)**Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 1**

The response demonstrates sophistication of thought as it explores the complexity of Thomas's thoughts about authenticity and examines the tensions within the passage. For example, the response notes how Thomas describes the feeling inside him as “‘like decay’ or ‘an inner force’, as something that he cannot escape” (paragraph 3) and then notes that the inner life of Thomas is portrayed “as a constant cycle of mundanity and his deep desire to get out of it, despite his acknowledgement he will never be able to do so” (paragraph 4). The response earned 1 point in Row C.

Sample: 2B**Score: 1-3-0****Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1**

The essay provides a defensible interpretation of the complex portrayal of Thomas through its thesis statement that appears in paragraph 1: “In this excerpt from her book, *The Bradshaw Variations*, Rachel Cusk uses juxtaposition and imagery to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas as a man who values authenticity, ultimately pointing to the theme that to have a true relationship with someone, authenticity is needed.” It earned 1 point in Row A.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 3

The response provides specific evidence to support all claims in its line of reasoning that focuses on Thomas's appreciation of authenticity. Paragraph 2 offers evidence of Thomas's perception of an inauthentic relationship through a comparison of Olga's “stream of consciousness conversation” about her teeth and Thomas's “half-listening” to her: “‘When he talks to Olga he is both there and not there,’ (par 4).” The essay explains that “Thomas finds it difficult to truly listen and connect” because “For Thomas, having the same conversation every morning is inauthentic.” In contrast, the response notes how Thomas “‘needs to be ready’” for when his wife Tonie arrives in the kitchen as evidence that “[indicates] that he is expecting some sort of authenticity with their conversation, and expecting to get actual value from it” (paragraph 2). This evidence supports the claim that “His deep connection with Tonie stems from their authentic conversations and interactions together, which he does not have with Olga, so he can only develop a passing acquaintanceship with her.”

In paragraph 3, the essay then examines Cusk's use of imagery in service to the concept of authenticity in relationships and offers as evidence, “‘He is as though sealed behind glass. He wonders if she realises this, realises that she can see but not touch him.’” This evidence is followed by commentary that “Olga cannot break through to Thomas in this conversation because he feels it is inauthentic.” This commentary supports the claim that “The authenticity of things matters deeply to Thomas.”

Not all claims, however, are adequately supported by the commentary. For example, in paragraph 3, the observation that “To Thomas, this is the same conversation happening every morning, and he is having difficulty reciprocating” is underdeveloped, as is the characterization of Thomas as one “who isn't great at listening” (paragraph 2). The essay, therefore, earned 3 points in Row B.

Question 2 (continued)**Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 0**

The response does not demonstrate sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument. Although it acknowledges a complexity within Thomas’s character in stating that, “Thomas understands this [inability to reciprocate is] a failure of his, and that is why he turns the music up, as a sort of penance for his failure to be reached,” that point is not developed further. The response did not earn the point in Row C.

Sample: 2C**Score: 1-2-0****Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1**

The essay provides a defensible interpretation of the passage in its thesis: “Thomas can be understood as an open free thinker but hes also only held up on his own concerns.” The thesis is the first sentence of the essay and earned 1 point for the essay.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 2

The response offers some specific, relevant evidence; for example, in paragraph 2, it mentions, “The conversation he has with thte renter is only about the renters teeth and he never asked any more questions” and ““He hears her tread and doesnt recognize it: that is how her identifiys her.”” The accompanying commentary, however, is vague: “This can be understood that he knows its the lodger but she is not family to him so he never truley knows her.” The essay also does not support the claim that Thomas is “an open free thinker.” No line of reasoning is developed within the essay. Paragraph 3 contains evidence that consists of broad generalities, such as, “It can be seen that hes trying to pass time while he waits for his true interests.” Additionally, the observation “He is almst portayed as a self centered man concerning his own needs before engagin with others fully” is unsupported and not relevant to the thesis. In paragraph 4, the response explains how the evidence, ““There are, it seems, limitless copies of this conversation but it never goes anywhere or devlopes’,” relates to the interpretation through the commentary, “It can be understood that he means there is no true relitivity or imortance in the conversations they have. Its just a time in his day that he fills meaninglessly waiting for his true wants and needs.” However, the commentary does not explain the connection to other points and, therefore, does not help to establish a line of reasoning. Instead, the response offers repetitive observations about Thomas being “an open free thinker” without evidential support. The response earned 2 points in Row 2.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

The response does not demonstrate sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument. It did not, therefore, earn the point in Row C.