

2026



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# AP<sup>®</sup> English Literature and Composition

## Free-Response Questions

**ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION**  
**SECTION II**  
**TIME – 2 HOURS**

**Directions:**

Section II has 3 free-response questions and lasts 2 hours.

This section of the exam requires answers in essay form. Each essay will be judged on its clarity and effectiveness in dealing with the assigned topic and on the quality of the writing. In responding to Question 3, select a work of fiction that will be appropriate to the question. Use a work that you are familiar with either from your AP English Literature and Composition class or from other literature you have previously read.

You may pace yourself as you answer the questions in this section, or you may use these optional timing recommendations:

It is suggested that you spend an equal amount of time, approximately 40 minutes, on each question.

You may use scratch paper for notes and planning, but credit will only be given for responses entered in this application. Text you enter as an annotation will **not** be included as part of your answer. You can go back and forth between questions in this section until time expires. The clock will turn red when 5 minutes remain—**the proctor will not give you any time updates or warnings.**

Note: This exam was originally administered digitally. It is presented here in a format optimized for teacher and student use in the classroom.

1. In Christopher Gilbert’s poem “Marking Time,” published in 1984, the speaker observes his surroundings during a morning jog. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Gilbert uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker’s complex reflections while jogging.

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.

### Marking Time

Jogging out in the morning  
against the few high clouds the blue  
sky is a memory like a sheer silk fabric  
held so far back I can’t see through it—  
*Line 5* when I breathe the new air my body  
is young all over, a smell reminds  
how the two pear trees are white  
again, their flowers ephemeral  
as the words I recite to pass time  
*10* in repetitious wheezed breath—  
squirrels, blue jays, downed trees for markers  
to say how far I’ve gone, to be used  
in their brief names to crowd my mind  
with anything I can count on.  
*15* Today as I struggle against the wind  
up the hill I watch a small butterfly  
wavering with spread wings, and remember  
dreaming of my sister who called  
last night when I was sleeping, and how  
*20* twenty years ago she gave me  
from the held darkness of her brown palms  
a black butterfly with yellow specks.  
What it was she said is immaterial,  
there is the gesture though:

25 and watching a bird overhead fly  
past the disk of sun, there is a flaring  
shadow fanned down from above  
that flickers like a rustled page  
with a poem on it; it is that quick  
30 flute darkness of a sister's voice  
a brother will hear in his heart  
when he's breathing deep enough.

Christopher Gilbert, "Marking Time" from *Turning into Dwelling*. Copyright © 1984 by Christopher Gilbert. Used with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Graywolf Press, graywolfpress.org.

2. The following excerpt is from Aimee Bender’s novel *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, published in 2010. In this passage, the narrator, Rose, discovers that when she eats food she has the unique ability to perceive the feelings of the person who prepared it. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Bender uses literary elements and techniques to convey the narrator’s complex experience of eating the chocolate lemon cake her mother has prepared.

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.

Par:  
1 My birthday cake was her latest project because it was not from a mix but instead built from scratch—the flour, the baking soda, lemon-flavored because at eight that had been my request; I had developed a strong love for sour. We’d looked through several cookbooks together to find just the right one, and the smell in the kitchen was overpoweringly pleasant. To be clear: the bite I ate was delicious. Warm citrus-baked batter lightness enfolded by cool deep dark swirled sugar.

2 But the day was darkening outside, and as I finished that first bite, as that first impression faded, I felt a subtle shift inside, an unexpected reaction. As if a sensor, so far buried deep inside me, raised its scope to scan around, alerting my mouth to something new. Because the goodness of the ingredients—the fine chocolate, the freshest lemons—seemed like a cover over something larger and darker, and the taste of what was underneath was beginning to push up from the bite. I could absolutely taste the chocolate, but in drifts and traces, in an unfurling, or an opening, it seemed that my mouth was also filling with the taste of smallness, the sensation of shrinking, of upset, tasting a distance I somehow knew was connected to my mother, tasting a crowded sense of her thinking, a spiral, like I could almost even taste the grit in her jaw that had created the headache that meant she had to take as many aspirins as were necessary, a white dotted line of them in a row on the nightstand like an [ellipsis](#) to her comment: I’m just going to lie down.... None of it was a bad taste, so much, but there was a kind of lack of wholeness to the flavors that made it taste hollow, like the lemon and chocolate were just surrounding a hollowness. My mother’s able hands had made the cake, and her mind had known how to balance the ingredients, but she was not there, in it. It so scared me that I took a knife from a drawer and cut out a big slice, ruining the circle, because I had to check again right that second, and I put it on a pink-flowered plate and grabbed a napkin from the napkin drawer. My heart was beating fast. [Eddie Oakley](#) shrank to a pinpoint. I was hoping I’d imagined it—maybe it was a bad lemon? or old sugar?—although I knew, even as I thought it, that what I’d tasted had nothing to do with ingredients—and I flipped on the light and took the plate in the other room to my favorite chair, the one with the orange-striped pattern, and with each bite, I thought—mmm, so good, the best ever, yum—but in each bite: absence, hunger, spiraling, hollows. This cake that my mother had made just for me, her daughter, whom she loved so much I could see her clench her fists from overflow sometimes when I came home from school, and when she would hug me hello I could feel how inadequate the hug was for how much she wanted to give.

3 I ate the whole piece, desperate to prove myself wrong.

- 4 When Mom got up, after six, she wandered into the kitchen and saw the slice taken out of the cake and found me slumped at the foot of the orange-striped chair. She knelt down and smoothed the hot hair of my forehead.
- 5 Rosie, she said. Sweets. You all right?
- 6 I blinked open eyes, with eyelids heavier now, like tiny lead weights had been strung, fishing-line style, onto each lash.
- 7 I ate a slice of cake, I said.
- 8 She smiled at me. I could still see the headache in her, pulsing in her left eyebrow, but the smile was real.
- 9 That's okay, she said, rubbing the underside of her eye bone. How'd it turn out?
- 10 Fine, I said, but my voice wavered.

Excerpt from *THE PARTICULAR SADNESS OF LEMON CAKE: A NOVEL* by Aimee Bender, (C) 2010 by Aimee Bender. Used by permission of Doubleday, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC and Dunow, Carlson & Lerner. All rights reserved.

**ellipsis:** punctuation mark consisting of a series of periods that indicates a pause or omission

**Eddie Oakley:** classmate with whom Rose is irritated

3. Many works of literature depict a conflict between the old and the new: Old worlds, old ways, or old values clash with newer ones.

Either from your own reading or from the following list, choose a work of fiction in which there is marked tension between the old and the new. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the tension between the old and the new contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
- Provide 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.

*Afterlife*

*The Ambassadors*

*Anna in the Tropics*

*Annie John*

*The Awakening*

*Behold the Dreamers*

*Bread Givers*

*Brooklyn*

*Ceremony*

*Disgrace*

*A Doll's House*

*Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine*

*Fences*

*Frankenstein*

*Hard Times*

*A House for Mr. Biswas*

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

*Kindred*

*The Mayor of Casterbridge*

*Middlemarch*

*Monkey Hunting*

*The Namesake*

*Native Speaker*

*The Nickel Boys*

*The Night Watchman*

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*

*North and South*

*Northanger Abbey*

*Passing*

*People of the Whale*

*The Rainbow*

*A Raisin in the Sun*

*The Remains of the Day*

*Romeo and Juliet*

*Sister Carrie*

*Song of Solomon*

*The Sun Also Rises*

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

*There There*

*Things Fall Apart*

*Typical American*

*The Way We Live Now*

*The Woman Warrior*

**STOP**  
**END OF EXAM**