

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2021 AP[®] English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	321,029		
• Number of Readers	1,547		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	15,846	4.9
	4	38,505	12.0
	3	86,502	26.9
	2	119,771	37.3
	1	60,405	18.8
• Global Mean	2.47		

The following comments on the 2021 free-response questions for AP English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David Miller of Mississippi College, with assistance from Chief Reader Designate Steven Price and Exam Leader Kathy Keyes. 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:** Ai, “The Man with the Saxophone”**Max. Points:** 6**Mean Score:** 3.26***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

Responses to this question were expected to demonstrate how students could read and analyze a poem, then use that reading and analysis to construct a response, a “well-written essay,” that showed a complex understanding of the speaker’s encounter with the musician “at that particular time and place.”

Reading the poem, of course, involves more than simply understanding the words and syntax. Students were expected to recognize the text as a poem, understand the various literary elements and techniques familiar to poetry, and then analyze the poem using those techniques. For example, in this particular poem, students might have noticed line length and structure, they might have observed stanza shape and form, they could have compared and contrasted the descriptive language used for both the speaker and the musician, and they could have examined the figurative language in the poem, including the metaphors of birds and flowers. They were also asked to note the setting, “that particular time and place,” highlighted by the poem’s title.

Using those techniques, they could then analyze those pieces of the poetic text and determine what each contributed to the whole of the poem and how. Using that evidence, they could make a defensible claim.

Because this was a timed writing task with a never-before-seen text, most often that thinking process was worked out as the responses were being written. Responses demonstrated the interactions between thinking and writing.

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?

Responses generally showed that students were able to access and understand the poem. Most were full complete essays exploring various literary techniques and illuminating various complexities of the encounter.

- Most students were able to read and understand the narrative of the poem.
- Many students were able to identify the presence of metaphors.
- Many students were able to see contrasts between the speaker and the musician.
- Many students were able to make a defensible claim about how the speaker was affected by the encounter.
- Most students were able to incorporate the setting into the discussion although some did so implicitly.

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">• Responses could identify literary elements and techniques but failed to offer commentary to explain how the parts worked in the whole.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Through the author’s use of a completely different tone and beautiful, welcoming, and transcending imagery and descriptions, such as ‘silence so complete’ and ‘heartland of pure noise’ clearly show the difference in the speaker’s emotions. He feels whole and transformed into a new man with excitement for music and recognition of beauty.” (Sample B)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Responses oversimplified the complexities of the encounter, settling instead for a simplistic view.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Illuminating the inherent need not only for appreciation of the little things, but of humans for one another, ‘The Man with the Saxophone’ demonstrates the affect of external events on internal emotions.” (Sample A)

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?

Poetry continues to be challenging for many students and for most of us as readers. The concentrated language, special structure, and focused attention of a poem makes the appropriate analytical skills essential, and in a timed writing situation, many students do not have enough time or space to explore ideas fully. Because of the timed nature of the essay, many start to write before they have fully thought through the poem—which is what anyone might do in a similar situation. Teachers can help the students here, by demonstrating how “writing while thinking” can be done.

Instead of simply requiring more timed responses in in-class situations, teachers and students might experiment with “writing together” by setting a timer and brainstorming to see and feel how ideas can be generated and take shape. To participate fully, the teachers should use poems that they are not familiar with and have not read before. This is another version of “messy reading” that I have suggested before but working within a timed setting helps the students to plan and not to panic as ideas are developing. While students do need “timed writing” practice, they should be helped to create strategies and shown how to gather and shape ideas—not simply be required to do more timed writings.

Another possibility here is to work through a multiple-choice section of the released exam to show students how asking questions of the text can lead to an overall reading. The multiple-choice questions on a passage are designed to help students in exam settings to develop complex readings of a difficult passage by moving through its pieces. Analyzing a set of multiple-choice questions for a particular passage—that is, asking what each question is pointing to and how that question contributes to an understanding of the whole—can be a good way for teachers and students to discover how questions can lead to an overall interpretation.

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

To better prepare students for the Poetry Analysis Free-Response Question, teachers may find the following resources helpful.

- **Unit Guides:** The Poetry Unit Guides in the Course and Exam Description can help teachers sequence and pace content and skills in their syllabi to provide students with repetition of practice using poetry analysis skills of increasing complexity.
- **AP Daily and AP Faculty Lecture videos:** The AP Daily videos and AP Faculty Lecture videos for Units 2, 5, and 8 can supplement teachers' poetry analysis instruction, as well as provide remediation for individual students who may struggle with a particular skill.
- **Personal Progress Checks:** The free-response questions in the Personal Progress Checks for Units 2, 5, and 8 are formative assessments that provide teachers with valuable data that can help inform their lesson planning throughout the year.
- **Question Bank:** The Question Bank on AP Classroom includes Poetry Analysis Free-Response Questions from previous exams that teachers can use for student practice and in-class assessments.
- **Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentaries:** Student Samples, Scoring Guidelines, and Scoring Commentaries for the Poetry Analysis Free-Response Question can be found on AP Central and clarify how the Poetry Analysis Free-Response rubric is applied to student writing on the exam.

Question #2**Task:** Prose Fiction
Analysis**Topic:** Tim Winton, *Breath***Max. Points:** 6**Mean Score:** 3.18***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

Responses to this question were, once again, expected to demonstrate how a student could carefully read a prose passage and then use an understanding of the literary elements and techniques associated with prose fiction to explain how the author represents the complex response of the narrator to the prank.

In this question, then, students had to think about the author's construction of the passage and how it might be designed to produce a particular effect or convey a particular representation of the narrator's response. This requires students to think both about the narrative of the text and about its construction and manipulation. It might also require them to think about how an author can affect a reader's perceptions—not just a narrator's response.

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?

Most responses addressed the prompt directly. Responses demonstrated that students found the passage accessible and relatable. Most responses also demonstrated that students were familiar with the literary elements and techniques appropriate for prose analysis.

- Many responses demonstrated that students were able to read and understand the details of the narrative.
- Many students were able to offer a defensible claim in response to the prompt.
- Many responses discussed the complexity of the narrator's response, examining the feelings attached to the friend who perpetrates the prank and the woman who responds to the prank.
- Many responses examined literary elements such as syntax, diction, and figurative language.
- Some responses dealt with the author directly, although most did so implicitly.

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

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	Responses that Demonstrate Understanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responses sometimes offered claims but did not support the claims with evidence. They asserted but did not show. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “His attitude towards his newfound authority is demonstrated in carefully selected diction that reveals his mind’s inner workings. He feels himself ‘rise to the moment’, feeling ‘taller’ as if bolstered by the responsibility. He seems excited to have such a critically important job.” (Sample A)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responses sometimes mentioned multiple literary elements and illustrated them but did not use those elements to construct a line of reasoning or to support a claim in response to the prompt. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Bruce responds quickly feeling a sense of responsibility and a strong desire to help which changes to more guilt and sympathy for the woman after understanding the prank. On top of those feelings we also see Bruce found the prank funny and was happy about it. Bruce’s complex feelings of responsibility, guilt, and glee in response to the prank are represented through Winston’s use of diction, tone and perspective.” (Sample B)

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?

Reading prose comes easier to students than reading poetry, but that in itself can be a problem. Students who read only for the narrative—the “what happened” in a text—often miss the more subtle, more complex aspects of characterization and action. Learning to read with and for complexity is a skill, not just for engaging literature but for nearly every human interaction. In the passage from *Breath*, students were introduced to a narrator struggling to understand his own mixed reactions. Teachers can work with this passage particularly to help students see:

- **Complexity**—that the narrator’s response consists of not one but several (sometimes contradictory) responses.
- **Construction**—that the author is consciously and carefully crafting the passage through literary elements and techniques to lead the reader through those responses.
- **Comprehension**—that by looking at the complexity and the construction, students can then make claims about how and why the author presents the passage in this way.

Another way to think of those steps would be to ask:

- “What is clashing in this passage?” or “What is in tension?”
- “How do we know what is clashing?” or “What elements point to the tensions?”
- “Why does the author create clashing ideas?” or “Why does the author give readers these feeling of tensions?”

The goal should be to help the students to understand that literary prose passages are meant to give us engaging characters and meaningful situations, but to also understand that those characters and situations are rarely simple and rarely able to be reduced to a single word or idea. In this passage, the narrator’s responses are not purely one thing or another; he experiences shifting sympathies and understandings. Highlighting that idea can help students develop a more nuanced understanding of their own experiences and reactions.

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

To better prepare students for the Prose Analysis Free-Response Question, teachers may find the following resources helpful.

- **Unit Guides:** The Short Fiction and Longer Fiction or Drama Unit Guides in the Course and Exam Description can help teachers sequence and pace content and skills in their syllabi to provide students with repetition of practice using prose analysis skills of increasing complexity.
- **AP Daily and AP Faculty Lecture videos:** The AP Daily videos and AP Faculty Lecture videos for Units 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 9 can supplement teachers' prose analysis instruction, as well as provide remediation for individual students who may struggle with a particular skill.
- **Personal Progress Checks:** The free-response questions in the Personal Progress Checks for Units 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 9 are formative assessments that provide teachers with valuable data that can help inform their lesson planning throughout the year.
- **Question Bank:** The Question Bank on AP Classroom includes Prose Analysis Free-Response Questions from previous exams that teachers can use for student practice and in-class assessments.
- **Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentaries:** Student Samples, Scoring Guidelines, and Scoring Commentaries for the Prose Analysis Free-Response Question can be found on AP Central and clarify how the Prose Analysis Free-Response rubric is applied to student writing on the exam.

Question #3**Task:** Literary
Argument**Topic:** Symbolic Houses**Max. Points:** 6**Mean Score:** 3.24***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

Responses to this question were designed to demonstrate choice, comprehension, and ability to develop and support a claim. While the first two free-response questions build on a supplied text, this question includes both the opportunity and the challenge for students to choose a work to discuss. The framework for that choice was the idea of a house as a “significant symbol.” Using that choice, the students were to make a defensible claim and defend it using the chosen work. A few points here are worth remembering:

- When scoring the exam, readers do not judge the student’s choice of text. Whatever the student chooses to write about, the reader will read and score the response.
- Readers also did not judge how the students defined the concept of “house”—if the student identified a literal or figurative structure, variations were acceptable.
- Finally, readers gave students latitude with their understanding of “significant symbol,” allowing students to make claims about what and how a “house” might signify.

What readers were looking for was analysis and synthesis—what pieces and parts were chosen for discussion, what explanation and commentary were given, and how that explanation and commentary created a “line of reasoning.”

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?

Responses demonstrated the wide range of student reading both within the AP course and outside of it. Students wrote about a wide variety of texts representing many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Familiar favorites such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Hamlet*, and *Wuthering Heights* made frequent appearances, but so did fantasy novels such as *House of Leaves*, dramas such as *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Fences*, and more contemporary works such as *Homegoing*, *The Kite Runner*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Responses also showed just how complex and nuanced many students’ understandings of “house” could be. Some understand the word to be primarily emotional and connected with community; others saw it as internal and subjective; still others explored it architecturally.

- Many responses demonstrated that students were able to choose appropriate texts for their discussion.
- Many responses demonstrated that students understood what a symbol was and how it could function.
- Many responses included remarkably specific and apt references to the text to support the argument.
- Many students were able to understand how a “significant symbol” does not just mean something in itself, but contributes to an overall understanding 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>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Responses sometimes offered broad, general claims about how houses functioned instead of making specific defensible claims.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “In <i>Wuthering Heights</i> by Emily Brontë she uses the location and juxtaposition of the homes of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange to contribute to the novel’s themes of revenge and isolation.” (Sample B)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Responses referred in summative ways to the details of the text or spoke only in broad generalities instead of offering specific evidence and clear commentary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “The trauma Sethe retains from the compound suffering of her slave-experience and her act of infanticide is represented by the ghost of the slain infant, who goes only by Beloved. This ghost haunts 124, Sethe and her remaining family’s home, just as how her trauma haunts her mind. Although nobody outside of the family dares to enter the home, Sethe refuses on ever leaving it, communicating the thematic message that trauma traps people, preventing them from moving forward.” (Sample A)

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 can help students choose more wisely for the literary argument question by understanding that the choice must fit the student-reader and the student-reader must fit the choice. Students should have a handful of texts that they feel they understand and remember enough about to write confidently regardless of the question posed. That comfort in understanding and remembering should outweigh discussions of “literary merit.” Students should not feel pressured to choose a canonical text that they are uncertain or unclear about. At the same time, students should be cautioned not to choose texts that are clearly facile or lacking in complexity, and they should not attempt to write about more than one text such as an entire series or set. Readers do not judge the literary merit of a text; instead, they are reading the responses to see how the student constructs the literary argument.

The best thing, then, teachers can do to help students prepare is to allow them guided choices:

- Most teachers already supply their classrooms with sets of texts encompassing a broad range of reading abilities, interests, and representations to help students find a variety of texts they might use for responses.
- Teachers can and should provide free reading times and engage students in conversation at the end of these times to build ideas.
- Teachers might help the students with these texts by posing key focusing questions about specific moments in the text instead of asking broader general questions. Choosing a detail and asking questions about it can help students see how a piece affects the whole.
- Teachers can also have students “pair off” in debate about a particular text, asking them to take opposing viewpoints and defend them, using the text.
- Teachers can also pair contemporary texts with older texts, for example, pairing Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* with *Antigone*, or pairing Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* with Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, or pairing *Hamilton* with *Julius Caesar*. What could and would the central characters in those paired texts think or say to their counterparts?

While, no doubt, there need to be “common texts” in an AP literature classroom, some of the long lists of required texts could probably be suspended in favor of more choice and less structure. Teachers can relax about the “canon question” and help students find the literature that fits their level and abilities. Literature choices should not be used to sort or restrain student engagement.

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

To better prepare students for the Literary Argument Free-Response Question, teachers may find the following resources helpful.

- **Unit Guides:** The Longer Fiction or Drama Unit Guides in the Course and Exam Description can help teachers sequence and pace content and skills in their syllabi to provide students with repetition of practice using literary argument skills of increasing complexity.
- **AP Daily and AP Faculty Lecture videos:** The AP Daily videos and AP Faculty Lecture videos for Units 3, 6, and 9 can supplement teachers’ literary argument instruction, as well as provide remediation for individual students who may struggle with a particular skill.
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