

## AP Language and Composition Prompts (1981 to 2011)

YEAR	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
1981	“The Rattler”- analyze effect on reader – consider organization, point of view, language, detail.	George Bernard Shaw letter – describe writer’s attitude toward mother & her cremation – diction and detail	Thomas Szasz – argue for or against his position on the struggle for definition. Use readings, study, or experience.
1982	A reading on happiness – summarize his reasons for his opinion and explain why you agree or not with his opinion	Analyze the strategies or devices (organization, diction, tone, detail) that make Gov. Stevenson’s Cat Veto argument effective.	Describe a place, conveying feeling through concrete and specific detail.
1983	A quote on change - Select a change for the better that has occurred or that you want to occur; analyze its desirable and undesirable effects	Excerpt from Thomas Carlyle’s <i>Past and Present</i> – define Carlyle’s attitude toward work and analyze how he uses language to convince....	Agree or disagree with the position in the passage on living in an era of language inflation by considering the ethical and social consequences of language inflation.
1984	Explain the nature and importance of two or three means by which you keep track of time and discuss how these means reveal your person. (Hint given about “inner clocks.”)	Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Milton – two very short quotes on freedom – describe the concept of freedom in each; discuss the differences.	A passage on a boxing match between Benny Paret, a Cuban, and Emile Griffith – Analyze how diction, syntax, imagery, and tone produce an effect on the reader.
1985	Contrast stylistic and rhetorical differences between two passages on the Soviet Launch of the first space satellite	Discuss the probable reasons for an anonymous writer’s additions and deletions and the ways in which those revisions change the effect of the paragraph. Two drafts that record the writer’s thoughts on how the experience of war affected his attitude toward language.	Defend a position or one or more issues raised in the passage about the state of television in the United States.
1986	Explain how two passages by N. Scott Momaday and Dee Brown, which describe similar landscapes, reveal the differences in the authors’ purposes. Consider diction, syntax, imagery, and tone.	Choose one or more pairs of words from a list and discuss and elaborate on the distinctions between the paired words. Consider how, when, why, and by whom each word might be used.	Evaluate the truth of the assertion in the quotation that human nature wants patterns, standards, and structures of behavior.
1987	Agree or disagree with E. M. Forster’s view that personal relations are more important than causes or patriotism.	Analyze how Zora Neale Hurston enriches our sense of her childhood world through her diction and manipulation of point of view.	Describe some major features of the language used in one specific group – occupational, ethnic, social, or age, etc. Indicate the purpose these features serve or what influences they reflect.

<b>1988</b>	Evaluate Alexis De Tocqueville's assertions about democracy and aristocracy and his assertion that democracy "throws [man] back forever upon himself alone."	Analyze Frederick Douglass' language, especially the figures of speech and syntax, to convey his states of mind upon escaping slavery and arriving in New York in 1838.	Pretend to contribute to a magazine or newspaper; write an article describing a place you know well that might be of interest to readers. Define the significance, use descriptive detail to make attitude clear.
<b>1989</b>	Argue for or against the validity of the implied criticism of a church bulletin [text given] reprinted without other comment in a magazine under the heading "The Religious Life."	Describe the rhetorical purpose of Martin Luther King's <i>Why We Can't Wait</i> . Analyze its stylistic, narrative, and persuasive devices.	Missing
<b>1990</b>	From an autobiography of a professional woman pilot in Africa, analyze how the author's juxtaposition of ideas, choice of details, and other aspects of style reveal her personality.	Analyze stylistic and rhetorical differences between two nineteenth century descriptions of the Galapagos Islands	Vividly and concretely describe one person seen at two different times or in two different situations so readers understand the difference in your attitude, thus proving perceptions of people differ according to people's attitudes and circumstances
<b>1991</b>	Analyze the language and rhetorical devices Igor Stravinsky uses to convey his point of view about orchestra conductors.	Analyze how Richard Rodriguez's presentation of the events in the passage suggests his attitude toward his family and himself. Consider narrative structure, detail, manipulation of language, and tone.	Write a persuasive essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies the assertion that "For in much wisdom is much grief, and increase of knowledge is increase of sorrow" (Ecclesiastes).
<b>1992</b>	Analyze Queen Elizabeth I's diction, imagery, and sentence structure to achieve her purpose in her speech to her troops at Tilbury, 1588.	Using your observation, experience, or reading, defend, challenge, or qualify Joseph Addison's assertion that men use ridicule to "laugh men out of virtue and good sense."	Considering the choice of the word "cripple" and other rhetorical features, such as tone, word choice, and rhetorical structure, analyze how Nancy Mairs, who has multiple sclerosis, presents herself.
<b>1993</b>	Compare the rhetorical strategies – such as arguments, assumptions, attitudes, diction – used by characters from Jane Austen (1813) and Charles Dickens (1865). Comment on both intended and probable effects of the proposals on the women being addressed	Defend, challenge, or qualify H. L. Mencken's views about the artist's relation to society. Refer to particular writers, composers, or other artists.	Read the paragraph for E. M. Forster's 1936 essay "My Wood." Define Forster's attitude toward the experience of owning property and analyze that attitude; consider Forster's word choice, manipulation of sentences, and use of Biblical Allusions
<b>1994</b>	From an excerpt of Sir George Savile's essay about King Charles II (1630 – 1685), define the attitude Savile would like us to adopt about Charles II and analyze the rhetorical strategies employed to promote that attitude.	Defend, challenge, or qualify Barbara Tuchman's claim that "wooden-headedness plays a remarkably large role ... in human affairs." Use evidence and/or your observations. (From <i>The March of Folly</i> )	Characterize and analyze Joan Didion's view of the Santa Ana winds. Consider her stylistic elements, such as diction, imagery, syntax, structure, tone, and selection of detail.

<b>1995</b>	In 1860, John Ruskin argued for giving precedence to the soldier rather than to the merchant or manufacturer. Evaluate his argument. (Excerpt included)	Analyze the rhetorical techniques Ellen Goodman uses to convey her attitude toward Phil, the subject of her piece, “The Company Man.”	After reading his paragraph, defend, challenge, or qualify James Baldwin’s ideas about the importance of language as a “key to identity” and social acceptance. Use your observation, experience, or readings.
<b>1996</b>	Read the passage from Lady Mary Wortley Montague’s letter to her daughter. Analyze how Lady Mary (1689 – 1762) uses rhetorical strategies and stylistic devices to convey her views about the role knowledge played in the lives of women of her time.	Read the passage from <i>A Summer Life</i> and analyze some of the ways in which Gary Soto recreates the experience of his guilty six-year old self. Consider such devices as contrast, reputation, pacing, diction, and imagery.	Using your own knowledge and experience, defend, challenge, or qualify Lewis Lapham’s view of “the American faith in money” from <i>Money and Class in America</i> . (25 line excerpt included.)
<b>1997</b>	Read the passage from Meena Alexander’s <i>Fault Lines</i> and analyze how Alexander uses language to explore and represent her fractured identity.	Read the passage from the 1845 <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave</i> , noting such elements as syntax, figurative language, and selection of detail. Write an essay in which you identify stylistic elements that distinguish third paragraph from the rest of the passage and discuss how that difference is significant	Using your own critical understanding of contemporary society, agree or disagree with Neil Postman’s assertion that Aldous Huxley’s vision of society in <i>Brave New World</i> is more relevant today than is George Orwell’s in <i>1984</i> .
<b>1998</b>	Paying particular attention to tone, analyze the techniques Charles Lamb uses to decline William Wordsworth’s invitation to visit him in the country.	From Henry James’s novel <i>The Portrait of a Lady</i> , read the conversation between Madame Merle and Isabel Archer, noting their conflicting views about what constitutes the self. In a persuasive essay, demonstrate which of the two conceptions of the self has greater validity. Use specific evidence from your observation, experience or reading.	After reading the two letters between an executive of the Coca-Cola company and a representative of Grove Press, analyze the rhetorical strategies each writer uses to achieve his purpose and explain which letter offers the more persuasive case.
<b>1999</b>	After reading two passages about Florida’s Okefenokee Swamp, analyze how the distinctive style of each reveals the purpose of its writer.	After reading the [3 columns long] opening from Jamaica Kincaid’s essay, “On Seeing England for the First Time,” analyze the rhetorical strategies Kincaid employs to convey her attitude toward England.	After thinking about the implications of the excerpt from <i>Antigone</i> , explore the validity of the assertion that “The only / Crime is pride.” Use examples from your reading, observation, or experience.
<b>2000</b>	Eudora Welty recalls reading and books that influenced her craft as a writer. Analyze how Welty’s language conveys intensity and value of reading.	George Orwell uses Gandhi to argue for choosing human imperfection over sainthood. Analyze how Orwell criticizes Gandhi’s position & how Orwell develops his own position.	Paraphrase King Lear’s comment that wealth covers sin and injustice. Defend, challenge, or qualify his view of the relationship between wealth and justice.
<b>2001</b>	George Eliot’s letter to an American woman M. F. Peirce. Analyze the rhetorical strategies Eliot uses to establish her position about the development of a writer.	Analyze how Mary Oliver’s style about owls conveys the complexity of her response to nature.	Support, refute, qualify Susan Sontag’s claim that photography limits understanding of the world. Use appropriate evidence.

<b>2002</b>	Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address was a short speech in which he contemplated the effects of the Civil War and offered his vision for the future. Analyze the rhetorical strategies Lincoln used to achieve his purpose.	Analyze how Virginia Woolf uses language to convey the lasting significance of moments she recalls from her childhood spent in a seaside village in Cornwall, England.	Support, refute, or qualify Czech writer Milan Kundera's claims as expressed in an excerpt from <i>Testaments Betrayed</i> . Use appropriate evidence.
<b>2003</b>	Defend, challenge, qualify Neal Gabler's assertion that entertainment has the capacity to ruin society.	Analyze the methods of Alfred Green's 1861 speech to persuade his fellow African Americans to join the Union forces.	Compare and contrast how John James Audubon and Annie Dillard each describe a flock of birds in flight and how they convey the birds' effect on the writer as observer.
<b>2004</b>	Analyze how the rhetorical strategies used by Lord Chesterfield in his letter to his son reveal his own values.	Choose a controversial local, national, or global issue with which you are familiar and use appropriate evidence in an essay that carefully considers the opposing positions on this controversy and proposes a solution or compromise.	Analyze how Richard Rodriguez uses contrasts between central Mexico and California to convey and explore his conflicting feelings in an excerpt from <i>Days of Obligation</i> .
<b>2005</b>	Passage from "Training for Statesmanship" by George Kennan. Select his most compelling observation and consider the extent to which that observation holds true.	A mock press release from <i>The Onion</i> . Analyze the strategies used in the article to satirize how products are marketed to consumers.	Peter Singer argues that prosperous people should donate to overseas aid organizations all money not needed for the basic requirements of life. Evaluate the pros and cons of his argument and indicate which position you find more persuasive.
<b>2005 Form B</b>	Lecture delivered in Boston in 1832 by Maria Stewart, African American educator and writer. Analyze the rhetorical strategies Stewart uses to convey her position.	John Barry describes the complex mechanics of the <i>Mississippi River in Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America</i> . Analyze how Barry communicates his fascination with the river to his readers.	Passage from <i>The Medusa and the Snail</i> by Lewis Thomas. Drawing on your own reading and experience, write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Thomas's claims.
<b>2006</b>	Jennifer Price's essay examines the popularity of the pink plastic flamingo in the 1950s. Analyze how Price crafts the text to reveal her view of U. S. culture.	William Hazlitt's "On the Want of Money." Analyze the rhetorical strategies he uses to develop his position about money.	From talk radio to television, to popular magazines to Web blogs ordinary citizens, political figures, and entertainers express their opinions on a wide range of topics. Take a position on the value of such public statements of opinion.
<b>2006 Form B</b>	In a well-written essay that draws upon your reading, experience, or observations for support, take a position on the issue of compulsory voting.	Passage from George Bernard Shaw's <i>Saint Joan</i> . Analyze the rhetorical strategies the Inquisitor uses to argue his case against Joan.	Passage by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies one of Schopenhauer's claims.

<b>2007</b>	<b>First Synthesis</b> – based on six sources, all about advertising. Develop a position on the effects of advertising and synthesize at least three of the sources for support.	In <i>Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World</i> , Scott Russell Sanders responds to an essay by Salman Rushdie, both of which discuss the effect of mass migrations. Analyze the strategies Sanders uses to develop his perspective about moving.	Develop a position on the ethics of offering incentives for charitable acts and support your position with evidence from your reading, observation, and/or experience.
<b>2007 Form B</b>	Based on six sources concerning museum artifacts and decisions made to include a particular piece of art or an artifact. Develop a position on the most important considerations facing the person responsible for securing a new work of art or an artifact for a museum. Synthesize at least three of the sources for support.	In the <i>Introduction to Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking</i> , Jessica Mitford says that it is an honor to be considered a muckraker. Do you agree or do you think that journalists who search out and expose real or apparent misconduct go too far in the pursuit of their stories. Explain your position.	Speech delivered by Wendell Phillips, a prominent white American abolitionist, praising Toussaint L’Ouverture, Haitian liberator. Analyze the strategies the speaker uses to praise his subject and move his audience.
<b>2008</b>	Based on seven sources concerning the elimination of the penny as the smallest American denomination. Develop a position on whether or not the penny should be eliminated and synthesize at least three of the sources for support.	Passage from John M. Barry’s <i>The Great Influenza</i> . Analyze how Barry uses rhetorical strategies to characterize scientific research.	Some people argue that corporate partnerships are a necessity for cash-strapped schools. Others argue that schools should provide an environment free from ads and corporate influence. Using appropriate evidence, write an essay in which you evaluate the pros and cons of corporate sponsorship for schools and indicate why you find one position more persuasive than the other.
<b>2008 Form B</b>	Based on six sources concerning a defined national school curriculum. Develop a position on whether or not there should be specific texts that all students of high school English should read. Synthesize at least three of the sources for support.	Passage from “America Needs Its Nerds” by Leonid Fridman. Analyze how Fridman develops his argument.	Read an excerpt from <i>The Decline of Radicalism</i> by Daniel Boorstin and consider the implications of the distinction Boorstin makes between dissent and disagreement. Defend, challenge, or qualify Boorstin’s distinction.
<b>2009</b>	Based on eight sources concerning space exploration. Develop a position about what issues should be considered most important in making decisions about space exploration and synthesize at least three of the sources for support.	Two passages from Edwin Wilson’s <i>The Future of Life</i> satirizing the language of two groups that hold opposing attitudes about environmentalism. Analyze how Wilson’s satire illustrates the unproductive nature of such discussions.	Write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies Horace’s assertion that the role of adversity (financial or political hardship, danger, misfortune, etc.) plays in developing a person’s character. Support your argument with evidence from your reading, observation, or experience

<b>2009 Form B</b>	Based on seven sources concerning public education. Choose an issue related to the tension in schools between individuality and conformity. Write an essay in which you use this issue to argue the extent to which schools should support individuality or conformity. Synthesize at least three of the sources for support.	Passage from “The Indispensable Opposition” by Walter Lippmann. Analyze the strategies Lippmann uses to develop his argument.	Passage from <i>The Worst Years of Our Lives</i> by Barbara Ehrenreich, about life in the 1980s. Support, refute, or qualify Ehrenreich’s assertions about television.
<b>2010</b>	Based on six sources concerning information technology. Our daily lives seem to be saturated with television, computers, cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and MP3 players, etc. In an essay that synthesizes at least three of the sources for support, evaluate the most important factors that a school should consider before using particular technologies in curriculum and instruction.	Excerpt from letter from Benjamin Banneker, former slave, to Thomas Jefferson (1791). Write an essay that analyzes how Banneker uses rhetorical strategies to argue against slavery.	In his 2004 book, <i>Status Anxiety</i> , Alain de Botton argues that the chief aim of humorists is not merely to entertain but “to convey with impunity messages that might be dangerous or impossible to state directly.” Think about the implications of de Botton’s view of the role of humorists (cartoonists, stand-up comics, satirical writers, hosts of television programs, etc.). Then write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies de Botton’s claim.
<b>2010 Form B</b>	Based on six sources concerning daylight savings time. Synthesize at least three of the sources into an essay that evaluates daylight saving time and offers a recommendation about its continued use.	Passage from <i>The Horizontal World</i> , Debra Marquart’s 2006 memoir about growing up in North Dakota. Analyze the strategies Marquart uses to characterize the upper Midwest.	The first Buy Nothing Day—a day on which people are urged to purchase no goods—was organized in Canada in 1992 as a way to increase awareness of excessive consumerism. Consider the implications of a day on which no goods are purchased. Then write an essay in which you develop a position on the establishment of an annual Buy Nothing Day.
<b>2011</b>	Based on seven sources concerning locavores, people who have decided to eat locally grown or produced products as much as possible, for sustainability and nutrition. Imagine that a community is considering organizing a locavore movement. In an essay that synthesizes at least three of the sources identify the key issues associated with the locavore movement and examine their implications for the community.	Speech by Florence Kelley (1859-1932), a United States social worker and reformer who fought successfully for child labor laws and improved conditions for working women, delivered before the convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in Philadelphia on July 22, 1905. Analyze the rhetorical strategies Kelley uses to convey her message about child labor to her audience.	Passage from <i>Rights of Man</i> , a book written by the pamphleteer Thomas Paine in 1791. Born in England, Paine was an intellectual, a revolutionary, and a supporter of American independence from England. Write an essay that examines the extent to which Paine’s characterization of America holds true today.

<b>2011 Form B</b>	Based on six sources concerning green living (practices that promote the conservation and wise use of natural resources). Synthesize at least three of the sources into an essay that develops a position on the extent to which government should be responsible for fostering green practices.	Letter written by Samuel Johnson in response to a woman who had asked him to obtain the archbishop of Canterbury's patronage to have her son sent to the university. Write an essay in which you analyze how Johnson crafts his denial of the woman's request.	American essayist and social critic H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) wrote, "The average man does not want to be free. He simply wants to be safe." Examine the extent to which Mencken's observation applies to contemporary society, supporting your position with appropriate evidence.
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1970 Poem: "Elegy for Jane" (Theodore Roethke)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you describe the speaker's attitude toward his former student, Jane.

**Elegy for Jane by Theodore Roethke**

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;  
And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;  
And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,  
And she balanced in the delight of her thought,

A wren, happy, tail into the wind,  
Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.  
The shade sang with her;  
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing,  
And the mould sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.

Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth,  
Even a father could not find her:  
Scraping her cheek against straw,  
Stirring the clearest water.

My sparrow, you are not here,  
Waiting like a fern, making a spiney shadow.  
The sides of wet stones cannot console me,  
Nor the moss, wound with the last light.

If only I could nudge you from this sleep,  
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.  
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:  
I, with no rights in this matter,  
Neither father nor lover.



1971 Poem: "The Unknown Citizen" (W.H. Auden)

**Prompt:** In a brief essay, identify at least two of the implications implicit in the society reflected in the poem. Support your statements by specific references to the poem.

**The Unknown Citizen by W.H. Auden**

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be  
One against whom there was no official complaint,  
And all the reports on his conduct agree  
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,  
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.  
Except for the War till the day he retired  
He worked in a factory and never got fired,  
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.  
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,  
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,  
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)  
And our Social Psychology workers found  
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.  
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day  
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.  
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,  
And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.  
Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare  
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan  
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,  
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.  
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content  
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;  
When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went.  
He was married and added five children to the population,  
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation.  
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.  
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:  
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

1976 Poem: "Poetry of Departures" (Philip Larkin)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you discuss how the poem's diction (choice of words) reveals his attitude toward the two ways of living mentioned in the poem.

**Poetry Of Departures by Philip Larkin**

Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,  
As epitaph:  
*He chucked up everything*  
*And just cleared off,*  
And always the voice will sound  
Certain you approve  
This audacious, purifying,  
Elemental move.

And they are right, I think.  
We all hate home  
And having to be there:  
I detest my room,  
It's specially-chosen junk,  
The good books, the good bed,  
And my life, in perfect order:  
So to hear it said

*He walked out on the whole crowd*  
Leaves me flushed and stirred,  
Like *Then she undid her dress*  
Or *Take that you bastard;*  
Surely I can, if he did?  
And that helps me to stay  
Sober and industrious.  
But I'd go today,

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,  
Crouch in the fo'c'sle  
Stubbly with goodness, if  
It weren't so artificial,  
Such a deliberate step backwards  
To create an object:  
Books; china; a life  
Reprehensibly perfect.

1977 Poem: "Piano" [2 poems with the same name] (D. H. Lawrence)

**Prompt:** Read both poems carefully and then write an essay in which you explain what characteristics of the second poem make it better than the first. Refer specifically to details of both poems.

**(1) Piano by D. H. Lawrence**

Somewhere beneath that piano's superb sleek black  
Must hide my mother's piano, little and brown, with the back  
That stood close to the wall, and the front's faded silk both torn,  
And the keys with little hollows, that my mother's fingers had worn.  
Softly, in the shadows, a woman is singing to me  
Quietly, through the years I have crept back to see  
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the shaking strings  
Pressing the little poised feet of the mother who smiles as she sings.  
The full throated woman has chosen a winning, living song  
And surely the heart that is in me must belong  
To the old Sunday evenings, when darkness wandered outside  
And hymns gleamed on our warm lips, as we watched mother's fingers glide.

Or this is my sister at home in the old front room  
Singing love's first surprised gladness, alone in the gloom.  
She will start when she sees me, and blushing, spread out her hands  
To cover my mouth's raillery, till I'm bound in her shame's heart-spun bands.

A woman is singing me a wild Hungarian air  
And her arms, and her bosom, and the whole of her soul is bare, -  
And the great black piano is clamouring as my mother's never could clamour  
And my mother's tunes are devoured of this music's ravaging glamour.

**(2) Piano by D. H. Lawrence**

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;  
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see  
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings  
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song  
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong  
to the old Sunday evenings at home, with the winter outside  
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour  
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour  
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast  
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

1978 Poem: "Law Like Love" (W.H. Auden)

**Prompt:** Read the poem and then write an essay discussing the differences between the conceptions of "law" in lines 1-34 and those in lines 35-60.

**Law Like Love by W. H. Auden**

Law, say the gardeners, is the sun,  
Law is the one  
All gardeners obey  
To-morrow, yesterday, to-day.

Law is the wisdom of the old,  
The impotent grandfathers feebly scold;  
The grandchildren put out a treble tongue,  
Law is the senses of the young.

Law, says the priest with a priestly look,  
Expounding to an unpriestly people,  
Law is the words in my priestly book,  
Law is my pulpit and my steeple.

Law, says the judge as he looks down his  
nose,  
Speaking clearly and most severely,  
Law is as I've told you before,  
Law is as you know I suppose,  
Law is but let me explain it once more,  
Law is The Law.

Yet law-abiding scholars write:  
Law is neither wrong nor right,  
Law is only crimes  
Punished by places and by times,  
Law is the clothes men wear  
Anytime, anywhere,  
Law is Good morning and Good night.

Others say, Law is our Fate;  
Others say, Law is our State;  
Others say, others say  
Law is no more,  
Law has gone away.  
And always the loud angry crowd,

Very angry and very loud,  
Law is We,  
And always the soft idiot softly Me.

If we, dear, know we know no more  
Than they about the Law,  
If I no more than you  
Know what we should and should not do  
Except that all agree  
Gladly or miserably  
That the Law is  
And that all know this  
If therefore thinking it absurd  
To identify Law with some other word,  
Unlike so many men  
I cannot say Law is again,

No more than they can we suppress  
The universal wish to guess  
Or slip out of our own position  
Into an unconcerned condition.  
Although I can at least confine  
Your vanity and mine  
To stating timidly  
A timid similarity,  
We shall boast anyway:  
Like love I say.

Like love we don't know where or why,  
Like love we can't compel or fly,  
Like love we often weep,  
Like love we seldom keep.

1979 Poems: "Spring And All" (William Carlos Williams) and "For Jane Meyers" (Louise Gluck)

**Prompt:** Read the two poems carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you show how the attitudes towards the coming of spring implied in these two poems differ from each other. Support your statements with specific references to the texts.

### Spring and All by William Carlos Williams

By the road to the contagious hospital  
under the surge of the blue  
mottled clouds driven from the  
northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the  
waste of broad, muddy fields  
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water  
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish  
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy  
stuff of bushes and small trees  
with dead, brown leaves under them  
leafless vines—

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish  
dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked,  
cold, uncertain of all  
save that they enter. All about them  
the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf  
One by one the objects are defined—  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance—Still, the profound change  
has come upon them: rooted they  
grip down and begin to awaken

### For Jane Meyers by Louise Gluck

Sap rises from the sodden ditch  
glues two green ears to the dead  
birch twig. Perilous beauty—  
and already Jane is digging out  
her colored tennis shoes,  
one mauve, one yellow, like large crocuses.

And by the laundromat  
the Bartletts In their tidy yard—

as though it were not -  
wearying, wearying

to hear in the bushes  
the mild harping of the breeze,  
the daffodils flocking and honking—

Look how the bluet\* falls apart, mud  
pockets the seed.  
Months, years, then the dull blade of the wind.  
It is spring | We are going to die |

And now April raises up her plaque of flowers  
and the heart  
expands to admit Its adversary.

\*bluet: a wild flower with bluish blossoms

1980 Poem "One Art" (Elizabeth Bishop)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you describe how the speaker's attitude toward loss in lines 16-19 is related to her attitude toward loss in lines 1-15. Using specific references to the text, show how verse form and language contribute to the reader's understanding of these attitudes.

**One Art by Elizabeth Bishop**

The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

5       Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

10       I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

15       I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

---Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

1981 Poem: "Storm Warnings" (Adrienne Rich)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you explain how the organization of the poem and the use of concrete details reveal both its literal and its metaphorical meanings. In your discussion, show how both of these meanings relate to the title.

**Storm Warnings by Adrienne Rich**

The glass has been falling all the afternoon,  
And knowing better than the instrument  
What winds are walking overhead, what zone  
Of gray unrest is moving across the land,  
I leave the book on a pillowed chair  
And walk from window to closed window, watching  
Boughs strain against the sky

And think again, as often when the air  
Moves inward toward a silent core of waiting,  
How with a single purpose time has traveled  
By secret currents of the undiscerned  
Into this polar realm. Weather abroad  
And weather in the heart alike come on  
Regardless of prediction.

Between foreseeing and averting change  
Lies all the mastery of elements  
Which clocks and weatherglasses cannot alter.  
Time in the hand is not control of time,  
Nor shattered fragments of an instrument  
A proof against the wind; the wind will rise,  
We can only close the shutters.

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black  
And set a match to candles sheathed in glass  
Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine  
Of weather through the unsealed aperture.  
This is our sole defense against the season;  
These are the things that we have learned to do  
Who live in troubled regions.

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

1982 Poem: "The Groundhog" (Richard Eberhart)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you analyze how the language of the poem reflects the changing perceptions and emotions of the speaker as he considers the metamorphosis of the dead groundhog. Develop your essay with specific references to the text of the poem.

**The Groundhog** by Richard Eberhart

In June, amid the golden fields,  
I saw a groundhog lying dead.  
Dead lay he; my senses shook,  
and mind outshot our naked frailty.  
There lowly in the vigorous summer  
His form began its senseless change,  
And made my senses waver dim  
Seeing nature ferocious in him.  
Inspecting close his maggots' might  
And seething cauldron of his being,  
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,  
I poked him with an angry stick.  
The fever arose, became a flame  
And Vigour circumscribed the skies,  
Immense energy in the sun,  
And through my frame a sunless trembling.  
My stick had done nor good nor harm.  
Then stood I silent in the day  
Watching the object, as before;  
And kept my reverence for knowledge  
Trying for control, to be still,  
To quell the passion of the blood;  
Until I had bent down on my knees  
Praying for joy in the sight of decay.  
And so I left; and I returned  
In Autumn strict of eye, to see  
The sap gone out of the groundhog,  
But the bony sodden hulk remained.  
But the year had lost its meaning,  
And in intellectual chains  
I lost both love and loathing,  
Mured up in the wall of wisdom.  
Another summer took the fields again  
Massive and burning, full of life,  
But when I chanced upon the spot  
There was only a little hair left,  
And bones bleaching in the sunlight  
Beautiful as architecture;  
I watched them like a geometer,  
And cut a walking stick from a birch.  
It has been three years, now.  
There is no sign of the groundhog.  
I stood there in the whirling summer,  
My hand capped a withered heart,  
And thought of China and of Greece,  
Of Alexander in his tent;  
Of Montaigne in his tower,  
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.

1983 Poem: "Clocks and Lovers" (W.H. Auden)



## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

**Prompt:** Write a well-organized essay in which you contrast the attitude of the clocks with that of the lover. Through careful analysis of the language and imagery, show how this contrast is important to the meaning of the poem.

### Clocks and Lovers by W. H. Auden

As I walked out one evening,  
Walking down Bristol Street,  
The crowds upon the pavement  
Were fields of harvest wheat.

(5) And down by the brimming river  
I heard a lover sing  
Under an arch of the railway;  
"Love has no ending.

I'll love you, dear, I'll love you  
(10) Till China and Africa meet,  
And the river jumps over the mountain  
And the salmon sing in the street.

I'll love you till the ocean  
Is folded and hung up to dry,  
(15) And the seven stars go squawking  
Like geese about the sky.

The years shall run like rabbits,  
For in my arms I hold  
The Flower of the Ages,  
(20) And the first love of the world."

But all the clocks in the city  
Began to whirr and chime:  
"O let not Time deceive you,  
You cannot conquer Time.

(25) In the burrows of the Nightmare  
Where Justice naked is,  
Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss.

In headaches and in worry  
(30) Vaguely life leaks away,  
And Time will have his fancy  
To-morrow or to-day.

Into many a green valley  
Drifts the appalling snow;  
(35) Time breaks the threaded dances  
And the diver's brilliant bow.

O plunge your hands in water,  
Plunge them in up to the wrist;  
Stare, stare in the basin  
(40) And wonder what you've missed.

The glacier knocks in the cupboard,  
The desert sighs in the bed,  
And the crack in the tea-cup opens  
A lane to the land of the dead.

(45) Where the beggars raffle the banknotes  
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,  
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,  
And Jill goes down on her back.

O look, look in the mirror,  
(50) O look in your distress;  
Life remains a blessing  
Although you cannot bless.

O stand, stand at the window  
As the tears scald and start; -  
(55) You shall love your crooked neighbour  
With your crooked heart."

It was late, late in the evening  
The lovers they were gone;  
The clocks had ceased their chiming,  
And the deep river ran on.

1985 Poems: “There Was A Boy” (William Wordsworth) and “The Most of It” (Robert Frost)

**Prompt:** These two poems present encounters with nature, but the two poets handle those encounters very differently. In a well-organized essay, distinguish between the attitudes (toward nature, toward the solitary individual, etc.) expressed in the poems and discuss the techniques that the poets use to present these attitudes. Be sure to support your statements with specific references.

### **There was a boy by William Wordsworth**

There was a boy; ye knew him well, ye cliffs  
And islands of Winander! -- many a time,  
At evening, when the earliest stars began  
move along the edges of the hills,  
or setting, would he stand alone,  
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake;  
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands  
Pressed closely palm to palm and to his mouth  
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,  
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls  
That they might answer him.--And they would shout  
Across the watery vale, and shout again,  
Responsive to his call,--with quivering peals,  
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud  
Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild  
Of jocund din! And, when there came a pause  
Of silence such as baffled his best skill:  
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung  
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise  
Has carried far into his heart the voice  
Of mountain-torrents; or the visible scene  
Would enter unawares into his mind  
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,  
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received  
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

**Notes:** The vale of Esthwaite with its village of Hawkshead, the school which Wordsworth attended, and the nearby churchyard as here described. The schoolmate whose grave was in the churchyard was probably John Vickers who died in 1782, when Wordsworth was twelve.

### **The Most of It by Robert Frost**

He thought he kept the universe alone;  
For all the voice in answer he could wake  
Was but the mocking echo of his own  
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.  
Some morning from the boulder-broken  
beach  
He would cry out on life, that what it wants  
Is not its own love back in copy speech,  
But counter-love, original response.  
And nothing ever came of what he cried  
Unless it was the embodiment that crashed  
In the cliff's talus<sup>1</sup> on the other side,  
And then in the far-distant water splashed,  
But after a time allowed for it to swim,  
Instead of proving human when it neared  
And someone else additional to him,  
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,  
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,  
And landed pouring like a waterfall,  
And stumbled through the rocks with horny  
tread,  
And forced the underbrush--and that was all.

<sup>1</sup> rock debris at the bottom of a cliff

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

1986 Poem: "Ogun" (E. K. Braithwaite)

**Prompt:** Read the poem. You will note that it has two major sections that are joined by another section lines 21-26. Write an essay in which you discuss how the diction, imagery, and movement of verse in the poem reflect differences in tone and content between the two larger sections.

### Ogun by Edward Kamau Braithwaite

My uncle made chairs, tables, balanced doors on, dug out  
coffins, smoothing the white wood out

with plane and quick sandpaper until  
it shone like his short-sighted glasses.

5 The knuckles of his hands were sil-  
vered knobs of nails hit, hurt and flat-

tened out with blast of heavy hammer. He was knock-knee'd, flat-  
footed and his clip clop sandals slapped across the concrete

flooring of his little shop where canefield mulemen and a fleet  
10 of Bedford lorry drivers dropped in to scratch themselves and talk.

There was no shock of wood, no beam  
of light mahogany his saw teeth couldn't handle.

When shaping squares for locks, a key hole  
care tapped rat tat tat upon the handle

15 of his humpbacked chisel. Cold  
world of wood caught fire as he whittled: rectangle

window frames, the intersecting x of fold-  
ing chairs, triangle

trellises, the donkey  
20 box-cart in its squeaking square.

But he was poor and most days he was hungry.  
Imported cabinets with mirrors, formica table

tops, spine-curving chairs made up of tubes, with hollow  
steel-like bird bones that sat on rubber ploughs,

25 thin beds, stretched not on boards, but blue high-tensioned cables,  
were what the world preferred.

And yet he had a block of wood that would have baffled them.  
With knife and gimlet care he worked away at this on Sundays,

explored its knotted hurts, cutting his way  
30 along its yellow whorls until his hands could feel

how it had swelled and shivered, breathing air,  
its weathered green burning to rings of time,

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

1987 Poem: "Sow" (Sylvia Plath)

**Prompt:** Read the poem. Then write an essay in which you analyze the presentation of the sow. Consider particularly how the language of the poem reflects both the neighbor's and the narrator's perceptions of the sow and how the language determines the reader's perceptions. Be certain to discuss how the portrayal of the sow is enhanced by such features as diction, devices of sound, images, and allusions.

**Sow** by Sylvia Plath

God knows how our neighbor managed to breed  
His great sow:  
Whatever his shrewd secret, he kept it hid

In the same way  
He kept the sow -- impounded from public stare,  
Prize ribbon and pig show.

But one dusk our questions commended us to a tour  
Through his lantern-lit  
Maze of barns to the lintel of the sunk sty door

To gape at it:  
This was no rose-and-larkspurred china suckling  
With a penny slot

For thrifty children, nor dolt pig ripe for heckling,  
About to be  
Glorified for prime flesh and golden crackling

In a parsley halo;  
Nor even one of the common barnyard sows,  
Mire-smirched, blowzy,

Maunching thistle and knotweed on her snout-cruise --  
Bloat tun of milk  
On the move, hedged by a litter of feat-foot ninnies

Shrilling her hulk  
To halt for a swig at the pink teats. No. This vast  
Brobdingnag bulk

Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost,  
Fat-rutted eyes  
Dream-filmed. What a vision of ancient hoghood must

Thus wholly engross  
The great grandam! -- our marvel blazoned a knight,  
Helmed, in cuirass,

Unhorsed and shredded in the grove of combat  
By a grisly-bristled  
Boar, fabulous enough to straddle that sow's heat.

But our farmer whistled,  
Then, with a jocular fist thwacked the barrel nape,  
And the green-copse-castled

Pig hove, letting legend like dried mud drop,  
Slowly, grunt  
On grunt, up in the flickering light to shape

A monument  
Prodigious in gluttonies as that hog whose want  
Made lean Lent

Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint,  
Proceeded to swill  
The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent.

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

1988 Poems: "Bright Star" (John Keats) and "Choose Something Like a Star" (Robert Frost)

**Prompt:** Read the following two poems very carefully, noting that the second includes an allusion to the first. Then write a well-organized essay in which you discuss their similarities and differences. In your essay, be sure to consider both theme and style.

### **Bright Star by John Keats**

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art--  
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night  
And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,  
The moving waters at their priestlike task  
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,  
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask  
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors--  
No--yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,  
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,  
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
And so live ever--or else swoon to death.

### **Choose Something Like a Star by Robert Frost**

O Star (the fairest one in sight),  
We grant your loftiness the right  
To some obscurity of cloud --  
It will not do to say of night,  
Since dark is what brings out your light.  
Some mystery becomes the proud.  
But to be wholly taciturn  
In your reserve is not allowed.

Say something to us we can learn  
By heart and when alone repeat.  
Say something! And it says "I burn."  
But say with what degree of heat.  
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.  
Use language we can comprehend.  
Tell us what elements you blend.

It gives us strangely little aid,  
But does tell something in the end.  
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,  
Not even stooping from its sphere,  
It asks a little of us here.  
It asks of us a certain height,  
So when at times the mob is swayed  
To carry praise or blame too far,  
We may choose something like a star  
To stay our minds on and be staid.

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

1989 Poem: "The Great Scarf of Birds" (John Updike)

**Prompt:** Write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poem's organization, diction, and figurative language prepare the reader for the speaker's concluding response.

- Playing golf on Cape Ann in October,  
I saw something to remember.
- (5) Ripe apples were caught like red fish in the nets  
of their branches. The maples  
were colored like apples,  
part orange and red, part green.  
The elms, already transparent trees,  
seemed swaying vases full of sky. The sky  
(10) was dramatic with great straggling V's  
of geese streaming south, mare's-tails above them.  
Their trumpeting made us look up and around.  
The course sloped into salt marshes,  
and this seemed to cause the abundance of birds.
- (15) As if out of the Bible  
or science fiction,  
a cloud appeared, a cloud of dots  
like iron filings which a magnet  
underneath the paper undulates.  
(20) It dartingly darkened in spots,  
paled, pulsed, compressed, distended, yet  
held an identity firm: a flock  
of starlings, as much one thing as a rock.  
One will moved above the trees  
the liquid and hesitant drift.
- (25) Come nearer, it became less marvellous,  
more legible, and merely huge.  
"I never saw so many birds!" my friend exclaimed.  
We returned our eyes to the game.  
(30) Later, as Lot's wife must have done,  
in a pause of walking, not thinking of calling down a consequence,  
I lazily looked around.
- (35) The rise of the fairway above us was tinted,  
so evenly tinted I might not have noticed  
but that at the rim of the delicate shadow  
the starlings were thicker and outlined the flock  
as an inkstain in drying pronounces its edges.  
The gradual rise of green was vastly covered;  
(40) I had thought nothing in nature could be so broad  
but grass.
- And as  
I watched, one bird,  
prompted by accident or will to lead,  
(45) ceased resting, and, lifting in a casual billow,  
the flock ascended as a lady's scarf,  
transparent, of gray, might be twitched  
by one corner, drawn upward and then,  
decided against, negligently tossed toward a chair:  
the southward cloud withdrew into the air.  
(50) Long had it been since my heart  
had been lifted as it was by the lifting of that great scarf.

1990 Poem: Soliloquy from *Henry IV, Part II* (William Shakespeare)

**Prompt:** In the soliloquy, King Henry laments his inability to sleep. In a well-organized essay, briefly summarize the King's thoughts and analyze how the diction, imagery, and syntax help to convey his state of mind.

### **Soliloquy from Henry IV Part II**

How many thousand of my poorest subjects  
Are at this hour asleep! O sleep! O gentle sleep!  
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,  
That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down,  
And steep my senses in forgetfulness?  
Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs\*,  
Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,  
And hush'd with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,  
Than in the perfum'd chambers of the great,  
Under the canopies of costly state,  
And lull'd with sound of sweetest melody?  
O thou dull god, why liest thou with the vile  
In loathsome beds, and leav'st the kingly couch  
A watch-case or a common Ôlarum-bell?  
Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast  
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains  
In cradle of the rude imperious surge,  
And in the visitation of the winds,  
Who take the ruffian billows by the top,  
Curling their monstrous heads ad hanging them  
With deaf'ning clamour in the slippery clouds,  
That with the hurly death itself awakes?  
Canst thou, O partial\* sleep, give thy repose  
To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,  
And in the calmest and most stillest night,  
With all appliances and means to boot,  
Deny it to a King? Then, happy low, lie down!  
Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

\*cribs: huts; \*partial: not impartial

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

1991 Poem: "The Last Night that She lived..." (Emily Dickinson)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you describe the speaker's attitude toward the woman's death. Using specific references from the text, show how the use of language reveals the speaker's attitude.

### **The Last Night that She Lived by Emily Dickinson**

The last Night that She lived  
It was a Common Night  
Except the Dying—this to Us  
Made Nature different

We noticed smallest things—  
Things overlooked before  
By this great light upon our Minds  
Italicized—as 'twere.

As We went out and in  
Between Her final Room  
And Rooms where Those to be alive  
Tomorrow were, a Blame

That Others could exist  
While She must finish quite  
A Jealousy for Her arose  
So nearly infinite—

We waited while She passed—  
It was a narrow time—  
Too jostled were Our Souls to speak  
At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot—  
Then lightly as a Reed  
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce—  
Consented, and was dead—

And We—We placed the Hair—  
And drew the Head erect—  
And then an awful leisure was  
Belief to regulate—



## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

1993 Poem: "The Centaur" (May Swenson)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you discuss how such elements as language, imagery, structure, and point of view convey meaning in the poem.

### The Centaur by May Swenson

The summer that I was ten --  
Can it be there was only one  
summer that I was ten?

It must have been a long one then --  
each day I'd go out to choose  
a fresh horse from my stable

which was a willow grove  
down by the old canal.  
I'd go on my two bare feet.

But when, with my brother's jack-knife,  
I had cut me a long limber horse  
with a good thick knob for a head,

and peeled him slick and clean  
except a few leaves for the tail,  
and cinched my brother's belt

around his head for a rein,  
I'd straddle and canter him fast  
up the grass bank to the path,

trot along in the lovely dust  
that talcumed over his hoofs,  
hiding my toes, and turning

his feet to swift half-moons.  
The willow knob with the strap  
jouncing between my thighs

was the pommel and yet the poll  
of my nickering pony's head.  
My head and my neck were mine,

yet they were shaped like a horse.  
My hair flopped to the side  
like the mane of a horse in the wind.

My forelock swung in my eyes,  
my neck arched and I snorted.  
I shied and skittered and reared,  
stopped and raised my knees,

pawed at the ground and quivered.  
My teeth bared as we wheeled

and swished through the dust again.  
I was the horse and the rider,  
and the leather I slapped to his rump

spanked my own behind.  
Doubled, my two hoofs beat  
a gallop along the bank,

the wind twanged in my mane,  
my mouth squared to the bit.  
And yet I sat on my steed

quiet, negligent riding,  
my toes standing the stirrups,  
my thighs hugging his ribs.

At a walk we drew up to the porch.  
I tethered him to a paling.  
Dismounting, I smoothed my skirt

and entered the dusky hall.  
My feet on the clean linoleum  
left ghostly toes in the hall.

Where have you been? said my mother.  
Been riding, I said from the sink,  
and filled me a glass of water.

What's that in your pocket? she said.  
Just my knife. It weighted my pocket  
and stretched my dress awry.

Go tie back your hair, said my mother,  
and Why is your mouth all green?  
Rob Roy, he pulled some clover  
as we crossed the field, I told her.

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

1994 Poems: "To Helen" (Edgar Allan Poe) and "Helen" (H.D.)

**Prompt:** The following two poems are about Helen of Troy. Renowned in the ancient world for her beauty, Helen was the wife of Menelaus, a Greek King. She was carried off to Troy by the Trojan prince Paris, and her abduction was the immediate cause of the Trojan War. Read the two poems carefully. Considering such elements as speaker, diction, imagery, form, and tone, write a well-organized essay in which you contrast the speakers' views of Helen.

### To Helen by Edgar Allan Poe

Helen, thy beauty is to me  
Like those Nicean barks of yore,  
That gently, o'er a perfum'd sea,  
The weary way-worn wanderer bore  
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,  
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,  
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home  
To the beauty of fair Greece,  
And the grandeur of old Rome.

Lo ! in that little window-niche  
How statue-like I see thee stand!  
The folded scroll within thy hand —  
A Psyche from the regions which  
Are Holy land !

### Helen by H. D.

All Greece hates  
the still eyes in the white face,  
the lustre of olives  
where she stands,  
and the white hands.

All Greece reviles  
the wan face when she smiles,  
hating it deeper still  
when it grows wan and white,  
remembering past enchantments  
and past ills.

Greece sees unmoved,  
God's daughter, born of love,  
the beauty of cool feet  
and slenderest knees,  
could love indeed the maid,  
only if she were laid,  
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

1995 Poem: "The Broken Heart" (John Donne)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the speaker uses the varied imagery of the poem to reveal his attitude toward the nature of love.

**The Broken Heart by John Donne**

He is stark mad, whoever says,  
That he hath been in love an hour,  
Yet not that love so soon decays,  
But that it can ten in less space devour ;  
Who will believe me, if I swear  
That I have had the plague a year?  
Who would not laugh at me, if I should say  
I saw a flash of powder burn a day?

Ah, what a trifle is a heart,  
If once into love's hands it come !  
All other griefs allow a part  
To other griefs, and ask themselves but some ;  
They come to us, but us love draws ;  
He swallows us and never chaws ;  
By him, as by chain'd shot, whole ranks do die ;  
He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry.

If 'twere not so, what did become  
Of my heart when I first saw thee?  
I brought a heart into the room,  
But from the room I carried none with me.  
If it had gone to thee, I know  
Mine would have taught thine heart to show  
More pity unto me ; but Love, alas !  
At one first blow did shiver it as glass.

Yet nothing can to nothing fall,  
Nor any place be empty quite ;  
Therefore I think my breast hath all  
Those pieces still, though they be not unite ;  
And now, as broken glasses show  
A hundred lesser faces, so  
My rags of heart can like, wish, and adore,  
But after one such love, can love no more.

1996 Poem: "The Author to Her Book" (Anne Bradstreet)

**Prompt:** Read carefully the following poem by the colonial American poet, Anne Bradstreet. Then write a well-organized essay in which you discuss how the poem's controlling metaphor expresses the complex attitude of the speaker.

**The Author to Her Book by Anne Bradstreet**

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,  
Who after birth did'st by my side remain,  
Till snatcht from thence by friends, less wise than true  
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view;  
Made thee in rags, halting to th' press to trudge,  
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge)  
At thy return my blushing was not small,  
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,  
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,  
Thy visage was so irksome in my sight;  
Yet being mine own, at length affection would  
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:  
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,  
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.  
I stretcht thy joints to make thee even feet,  
Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet;  
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,  
But nought save home-spun cloth, i' th' house I find.  
In this array, 'mongst vulgars mayst thou roam  
In critics hands, beware thou dost not come;  
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,  
If for thy father askt, say, thou hadst none:  
And for thy mother, she alas is poor,  
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.

1997 Poem: "The Death of a Toad" (Richard Wilbur)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how formal elements such as structure, syntax, diction, and imagery reveal the speaker's response to the death of a toad.

**The Death of a Toad by Richard Wilbur**

A toad the power mower caught,  
Chewed and clipped of a leg, with a hobbling hop has got  
To the garden verge, and sanctuaried him  
Under the cineraria leaves, in the shade  
Of the ashen heartshaped leaves, in a dim,  
Low, and a final glade.

The rare original heartsblood goes,  
Spends on the earthen hide, in the folds and wizenings, flows  
In the gutters of the banked and staring eyes. He lies  
As still as if he would return to stone,  
And soundlessly attending, dies  
Toward some deep monotone,

Toward misted and ebullient seas  
And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies.  
Day dwindles, drowning, and at length is gone  
In the wide and antique eyes, which still appear  
To watch, across the castrate lawn,  
The haggard daylight steer.

1998 Poem: "It's a Woman's World" (Eavan Boland)

**Prompt:** The following poem was written by a contemporary Irish woman, Eavan Boland. Read the poem carefully and then write an essay in which you analyze how the poem reveals the speaker's complex conception of a "woman's world."

**It's a Woman's World by Eavan Boland**

Our way of life  
has hardly changed  
since a wheel first  
whetted a knife.

Maybe flame  
burns more greedily  
and wheels are steadier,  
but we're the same:

we milestone  
our lives  
with oversights,  
living by the lights  
of the loaf left

by the cash register,  
the washing powder  
paid for and wrapped,  
the wash left wet:

like most historic peoples  
we are defined  
by what we forget

and what we never will be:  
star-gazers,  
fire-eaters.  
It's our alibi  
for all time:

as far as history goes  
we were never  
on the scene of the crime.

When the king's head  
gored its basket,  
grim harvest,  
we were gristing bread

or getting the recipe  
for a good soup.  
It's still the same:

our windows  
moth our children  
to the flame  
of hearth not history.

And still no page  
scores the low music  
of our outrage.

Appearances reassure:  
that woman there,  
craned to  
the starry mystery,

is merely getting a breath  
of evening air.  
While this one here,  
her mouth a burning plume -

she's no fire-eater,  
just my frosty neighbour  
coming home.

1999 Poem: "Blackberry-Picking" (Seamus Heaney)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully, paying particular attention to the physical intensity of the language. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how the poet conveys not just a literal description of picking blackberries but a deeper understanding of the whole experience. You may wish to include analysis of such elements as diction, imagery, metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, and form.

**Blackberry-Picking by Seamus Heaney**

Late August, given heavy rain and sun  
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.  
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot  
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.  
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet  
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it  
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for  
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger  
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots  
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.  
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills  
We trekked and picked until the cans were full  
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered  
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned  
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered  
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.  
We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.  
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,  
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.  
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush  
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.  
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair  
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

2000 Poems: Siren passage from the *Odyssey* (Homer) / "Siren Song" (Margaret Atwood)

**Prompt:** The story of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens and their enchanting but deadly song appears in Greek epic poetry in Homer's *Odyssey*. An English translation of the episode is reprinted in the left column below. Margaret Atwood's poem in the right column is a modern commentary on the classical story. Read both texts carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare the portrayals of the Sirens. Your analysis should include discussion of tone, point of view, and whatever poetic devices (diction, imagery, etc.) seem most appropriate.

. . . our trim ship was speeding toward  
the Sirens' island, driven by the brisk wind.

. . .

Now with a sharp sword I sliced an ample wheel of beeswax  
down into pieces, kneaded them in my two strong hands  
and the wax soon grew soft, worked by my strength  
and Helios' burning rays, the sun at high noon,  
and I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one.  
They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship –  
erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast –  
and rowed and churned the whitecaps stroke on stroke.  
We were just offshore as far as a man's shout can carry,  
scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship  
was racing past and burst into their high, thrilling song:  
"Come closer, famous Odysseus – Achaea's pride and glory –  
moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!  
Never has a sailor passed our shores in his black craft  
until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips,  
and once he hears to his heart's content sails on, a wiser man."

. . .

So they sent their ravishing voices out across the air  
and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.  
I signaled the crew with frowns to set me free –  
they flung themselves at the oars and rowed on harder.  
Perimedes and Eurylochus springing up at once  
to bind me faster with rope on chafing rope.  
But once we'd left the Sirens fading in our wake,  
once we could hear their song no more, their urgent call –  
My steadfast crew was quick to removed the wax I'd used  
to seal their ears and loosed the bonds that lashed me.



**Siren Song by Margaret Atwood**

This is the one song everyone  
would like to learn: the song  
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men  
to leap overboard in squadrons  
even though they see beached skulls

the song nobody knows  
because anyone who had heard it  
is dead, and the others can't remember.  
Shall I tell you the secret  
and if I do, will you get me  
out of this bird suit?  
I don't enjoy it here  
squatting on this island  
looking picturesque and mythical  
with these two feathery maniacs,  
I don't enjoy singing  
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,  
to you, only to you.  
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!  
Only you, only you can,  
you are unique

at last. Alas  
it is a boring song  
but it works every time.

2001 Poems: "London, 1802" (William Wordsworth) / "Douglass" (Paul Laurence Dunbar)

**Prompt:** In each of the following poems, the speaker responds to the conditions of a particular place and time – England in 1802 in the first poem, the United States about 100 years later in the second. Read each poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems and analyze the relationship between them.

**London, 1802 by William Wordsworth**

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee: she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
5 Have forfeited their ancient English dower  
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;  
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;  
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.  
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:  
10 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,  
So didst thou travel on life's common way,  
In cheerful godliness; and yet the heart  
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

**Douglass by Paul Laurence Dunbar**

Ah, Douglass, we have fall'n on evil days,  
Such days as thou, not even thou didst know,  
When thee, the eyes of that harsh long ago  
Saw, salient, at the cross of devious ways,  
5 And all the country heard thee with amaze.  
Not ended then, the passionate ebb and flow,  
The awful tide that battled to and fro;  
We ride amid a tempest of dispraise.  
  
Now, when the waves of swift dissension swarm,  
10 And Honor, the strong pilot, lieth stark,  
Oh, for thy voice high-sounding o'er the storm,  
For thy strong arm to guide the shivering bark,  
The blast-defying power of thy form,  
To give us comfort through the lonely dark.

2002 Poem: "The Convergence of the Twain" (Thomas Hardy)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then, taking into consideration the title of the poem, analyze how the poetic devices convey the speaker's attitude toward the sinking of the ship.

**The Convergence of the Twain by Thomas Hardy**

(Lines on the loss of the "Titanic")

I

In a solitude of the sea  
Deep from human vanity,  
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

II

Steel chambers, late the pyres  
Of her salamandrine fires,  
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

III

Over the mirrors meant  
To glass the opulent  
The sea-worm crawls—grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

IV

Jewels in joy designed  
To ravish the sensuous mind  
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

V

Dim moon-eyed fishes near  
Gaze at the gilded gear  
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?" . . .

VI

Well: while was fashioning  
This creature of cleaving wing,  
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

VII

Prepared a sinister mate  
For her—so gaily great—  
A Shape of Ice, for the time fat and dissociate.

VIII

And as the smart ship grew  
In stature, grace, and hue  
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

IX

Alien they seemed to be:  
No mortal eye could see  
The intimate welding of their later history.

X

Or sign that they were bent  
By paths coincident  
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

XI

Till the Spinner of the Years  
Said "Now!" And each one hears,  
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

2002B Poem: "If I Could Tell You" (W. H. Auden)

**Prompt:** The following poem is a villanelle, a form having strict rules of rhyme, meter, and repetition. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the formal elements of the poem contribute to its meaning.

**If I Could Tell You by W.H. Auden**

Time will say nothing but I told you so,  
Time only knows the price we have to pay;  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

If we should weep when clowns put on their show,  
If we should stumble when musicians play,  
Time will say nothing but I told you so.

There are no fortunes to be told, although,  
Because I love you more than I can say,  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

The winds must come from somewhere when they blow,  
There must be reasons why the leaves decay;  
Time will say nothing but I told you so.

Perhaps the roses really want to grow,  
The vision seriously intends to stay;  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

Suppose all the lions get up and go,  
And all the brooks and soldiers run away;  
Will Time say nothing but I told you so?  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

2003 Poem: “ΕΡΩΣ” (Robert Bridges) / “Eros” (Anne Stevenson)

**Prompt:** The following poems are both concerned with Eros, the god of love in Greek mythology. Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two concepts of Eros and analyze the techniques used to create them.

**‘ΕΡΩΣ<sup>1</sup> by Robert Bridges**

Why hast thou nothing in thy face?  
Thou idol of the human race,  
Thou tyrant of the human heart,  
The flower of lovely youth that art;  
Yea, and that standest in thy youth  
An image of eternal Truth,  
With thy exuberant flesh so fair,  
That only Pheidias<sup>2</sup> might compare,  
Ere from his chaste marmoreal<sup>3</sup> form  
Time had decayed the colours warm;  
Like to his gods in thy proud dress,  
Thy starry sheen of nakedness.

Surely thy body is thy mind,  
For in thy face is nought to find,  
Only thy soft unchristen’d smile,  
That shadows neither love nor guile,  
But shame;less will and power immense,  
In secret sensuous innocence.

O king of joy, what is thy thought?  
I dream thou knowest it is nought.  
And wouldst in darkness come, but thou  
Makest the light where’er thou go.  
Ah yet no victim of thy grace,  
None who e’er long’d for thy embrace,  
Hath cared to look upon thy face.

<sup>1</sup> Eros in Greek

<sup>2</sup> Greek sculptor of the fifth century B.C.

<sup>3</sup> marble

**Eros by Anne Stevenson**

I call for love  
But help me, who arrives?  
This thud with broken nose  
And squinty eyes.  
‘Eros, my bully boy,  
Can this be you,  
With boxer lips  
And patchy wings askew?’

‘Madam,’ cries Eros,  
‘Know the brute you see  
Is what long overuse  
Has made of me.  
My face that so offends you  
Is the sum  
Of blows your lust delivered  
One by one.

We slaves who are immortal  
Gloss your fate  
And are the archetypes  
That you create.  
Better my battered visage,  
Bruised but hot,  
Than love dissoloved in loss  
Or left to rot.’

2003B Poem: from *Modern Love* (George Meredith - 1862)

**Prompt:** The following poem is taken from *Modern Love*, a poetic sequence by the English writer George Meredith. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poet conveys a view of “modern love.”

**Modern Love I: By This He Knew She Wept by George Meredith**

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:  
That, at his hand’s light quiver by her head,  
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed  
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,  
5 And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,  
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay  
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away  
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes  
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears  
10 Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat  
Sleep’s heavy measure, they from head to feet  
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,  
By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.  
Like sculptured effigies they might be seen  
15 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;  
Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

2004 Poem: "We Grow Accustomed to the Dark" (Emily Dickinson) / "Acquainted with the Night" (Robert Frost)

**Prompt:** The poems below are concerned with darkness and night. Read each poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, compare and contrast the poems, analyzing the significance of dark or night in each. In your essay, consider elements such as point of view, imagery, and structure

### **We Grow Accustomed to the Dark by Emily Dickinson**

We grow accustomed to the Dark --  
When light is put away --  
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp  
To witness her Goodbye --

A Moment -- We uncertain step  
For newness of the night --  
Then -- fit our Vision to the Dark --  
And meet the Road -- erect --

And so of larger -- Darknesses --  
Those Evenings of the Brain --  
When not a Moon disclose a sign --  
Or Star -- come out -- within --

The Bravest -- grope a little --  
And sometimes hit a Tree  
Directly in the Forehead --  
But as they learn to see --

Either the Darkness alters --  
Or something in the sight  
Adjusts itself to Midnight --  
And Life steps almost straight.

### **Acquainted with the Night by Robert Frost**

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain -- and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.  
I have passed by the watchman on his beat  
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet  
When far away an interrupted cry  
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;  
And further still at an unearthly height,  
A luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.  
I have been one acquainted with the night.



2004B Poem: "Crossing the Swamp" (Mary Oliver)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the techniques the poet uses to develop the relationship between the speaker and the swamp.

**Crossing the Swamp by Mary Oliver**

Here is the endless  
    wet thick  
        cosmos, the center  
            of everything -- the nugget  
of dense sap, branching  
    vines, the dark burred  
        faintly belching  
            bogs. Here  
is swamp, here  
    is struggle,  
        closure--  
            pathless, seamless,  
peerless mud. My bones  
    knock together at the pale  
        joints, trying  
            for foothold, fingerhold,  
mindhold over  
    such slick crossings, deep  
        hipholes, hummocks<sup>1</sup>  
            that sink silently  
into the black, slack  
    earthsoup. I feel  
        not wet so much as  
            painted and glittered  
with the fat grassy  
    mires, the rich  
        and succulent marrows  
            of earth--a poor  
dry stick given  
    one more chance by the whims  
        of swamp water--a bough  
            that still, after all these years,  
could take root,  
    sprout, branch out, bud--  
        make of its life a breathing  
            palace of leaves.

<sup>1</sup>low mounds of earth

2005 Poem: "The Chimney Sweeper" (two poems of same name by William Blake)

**Prompt:** The poems below, published in 1789 and 1794, were written by William Blake in response to the condition of chimney sweeps. Usually small children, sweeps were forced inside chimneys to clean their interiors. Read the two poems carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, compare and contrast the two poems, taking into consideration the poetic techniques Blake uses in each.

**The Chimney Sweeper (1789)**

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry "weep! weep! weep!  
'weep!'"<sup>1</sup>  
So your chimneys I sweep, & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,  
That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd: so I said  
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's  
bare  
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white  
hair."

And so he was quiet, & that very night,  
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight! ---  
That thousand of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,  
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
And he open'd the coffins & set them all free;  
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they  
run,  
And wash in a river, and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,  
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;  
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,  
He'd have God for his father, & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,  
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.  
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy  
& warm;  
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

<sup>1</sup>The child's lisping attempt at the chimney sweep's street cry, "Sweep! Sweep!"

**The Chimney Sweeper (1794)**

A little black thing among the snow,  
Crying "weep! 'weep!" in notes of woe!  
"Where are thy father and mother? say?"  
"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,  
And smil'd among the winter's snow,  
They clothed me in the clothes of death,  
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,  
They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and  
King,  
Who make up a heaven of our misery."

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

2005B Poem: "Five A.M." (William Stafford) / "Five Flights Up" (Elizabeth Bishop)

**Prompt:** Carefully read the two poems below. Then in a well-organized essay compare the speakers' reflections on their early morning surroundings and analyze the techniques the poets use to communicate the speakers' different states of mind.

### **Five A. M. by William Stafford**

Still dark, the early morning breathes  
A soft sound above the fire. Hooded  
Lights on porches lead past lawns,  
A hedge; I pass the house of the couple  
Who have the baby, the yard with the little  
Dog; my feet pad and grit on the pavement, flicker  
Past streetlights; my arms alternate  
Easily to my pace. Where are my troubles?

There are people in every country who never  
Turn into killers, saints have built  
Sanctuaries on islands and in valleys,  
Conquerors have quit and gone home, for thousands  
Of years farmers have worked their fields.  
My feet begin the uphill curve  
Where a thicket spills with birds every spring.  
The air doesn't stir. Rain touches my face.

### **Five Flights Up by Elizabeth Bishop**

Still dark.  
The unknown bird sits on his usual branch.  
The little dog next door barks in his sleep  
inquiringly, just once.  
Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires  
once or twice, quavering.  
Questions---if that is what they are---  
answered directly, simply,  
by day itself.

Enormous morning, ponderous, meticulous;  
gray light streaking each bare branch,  
each single twig, along one side,  
making another tree, of glassy veins...  
The bird still sits there. Now he seems to yawn.

The little black dog runs in his yard.  
His owner's voice arises, stern,  
"You ought to be ashamed!"  
What has he done?  
He bounces cheerfully up and down;  
he rushes in circles in the fallen leaves.

Obviously, he has no sense of shame.  
He and the bird know everything is answered,  
all taken care of,  
no need to ask again.  
---Yesterday brought to today so lightly!  
(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)

2006 Poem: "Evening Hawk" (Robert Penn Warren)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poet uses language to describe the scene and to convey mood and meaning.

**Evening Hawk by Robert Penn Warren**

From plane of light to plane, wings dipping through  
Geometries and orchids that the sunset builds,  
Out of the peak's black angularity of shadow, riding  
The last tumultuous avalanche of  
Light above pines and the guttural gorge,  
The hawk comes.

    His wing  
Scythes down another day, his motion  
Is that of the honed steel-edge, we hear  
The crashless fall of stalks of Time.

The head of each stalk is heavy with the gold of our error.

Look! Look! he is climbing the last light  
Who knows neither Time nor error, and under  
Whose eye, unforgiving, the world, unforgiven, swings  
Into shadow.

    Long now,  
The last thrush is still, the last bat  
Now cruises in his sharp hieroglyphics. His wisdom  
Is ancient, too, and immense. The star  
Is steady, like Plato, over the mountain.

If there were no wind we might, we think, hear  
The earth grind on its axis, or history  
Drip in darkness like a leaking pipe in the cellar.

2006B Poem: "To Paint a Water Lily" (Ted Hughes)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then write an essay discussing how the poet uses literary techniques to reveal the speaker's attitudes toward nature and the artist's task.

**To Paint a Water Lily by Ted Hughes**

A green level of lily leaves  
Roofs the pond's chamber and paves

The flies' furious arena: study  
These, the two minds of this lady.

First observe the air's dragonfly  
That eats meat, that bullets by

Or stands in space to take aim;  
Others as dangerous comb the hum

Under the trees. There are battle-shouts  
And death-cries everywhere hereabouts

But inaudible, so the eyes praise  
To see the colours of these flies

Rainbow their arcs, spark, or settle  
Cooling like beads of molten metal

Through the spectrum. Think what worse  
is the pond-bed's matter of course;

Prehistoric bedragoned times  
Crawl that darkness with Latin names,

Have evolved no improvements there,  
Jaws for heads, the set stare,

Ignorant of age as of hour—  
Now paint the long-necked lily-flower

Which, deep in both worlds, can be still  
As a painting, trembling hardly at all

Though the dragonfly alight,  
Whatever horror nudge her root.

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

2007 Poems: "A Barred Owl" (Richard Wilbur) and "The History Teacher" (Billy Collins)

**Prompt:** In the following two poems, adults provide explanations for children. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing how each poet uses literary devices to make his point.

### **A Barred Owl by Richard Wilbur**

The warping night-air having brought the boom  
Of an owl's voice into her darkened room,  
We tell the wakened child that all she heard  
Was an odd question from a forest bird,  
Asking of us, if rightly listened to,  
"Who cooks for you?" and then "Who cooks for you?"

Words, which can make our terrors bravely clear,  
Can also thus domesticate a fear,  
And send a small child back to sleep at night  
Not listening for the sound of stealthy flight  
Or dreaming of some small thing in a claw  
Borne up to some dark branch and eaten raw.

### **The History Teacher by Billy Collins**

Trying to protect his students' innocence  
he told them the Ice Age was really just  
the Chilly Age, a period of a million years  
when everyone had to wear sweaters.

And the Stone Age became the Gravel Age,  
named after the long driveways of the time.

The Spanish Inquisition was nothing more  
than an outbreak of questions such as  
"How far is it from here to Madrid?"  
"What do you call the matador's hat?"

The War of the Roses took place in a garden,  
and the Enola Gay dropped one tiny atom on Japan.

The children would leave his classroom  
for the playground to torment the weak  
and the smart,  
mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses,

while he gathered up his notes and walked home  
past flower beds and white picket fences,  
wondering if they would believe that soldiers  
in the Boer War told long, rambling stories  
designed to make the enemy nod off.

2007B Poem: "Here" (Philip Larkin)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the techniques the poet uses to convey his attitude toward the places he describes.

**Here by Philip Larkin**

Swerving east, from rich industrial shadows  
And traffic all night north; swerving through fields  
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,  
And now and then a harsh-named halt, that shields  
5 Workmen at dawn; swerving to solitude  
Of skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants,  
And the widening river's slow presence,  
The piled gold clouds, the shining gull-marked mud.

Gathers to the surprise of town:  
10 Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster  
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,  
And residents from raw estates, brought down  
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,  
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires –  
15 Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,  
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers –

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling  
Where only salesmen and relations come  
Within a terminate and relations come  
20 Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum,  
Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives;  
And out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges  
Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,  
Isolate villages, where removed lives

25 Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands  
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,  
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,  
Luminously-peopled air ascends;  
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance  
30 Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach  
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:  
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

2008 Poems: "When I Have Fears" (John Keats) and "Mezzo Cammin" (Henry W. Longfellow)

**Prompt:** In the two poems below, Keats and Longfellow reflect on similar concerns. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing the poetic techniques each writer uses to explore his particular situation.

**When I Have Fears**

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
    Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
Before high-piled books, in charactery,  
    Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;  
5 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,  
    Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
    Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
10 That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
    Of unreflecting love; - then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

1818 ---John Keats (1795-1821)

**Mezzo Cammin<sup>1</sup>**

**Written at Boppard on the Rhine August 25, 1842,  
Just Before Leaving Home**

Half my life is gone, and I have let  
    The years slip from me and have not fulfilled  
    The aspiration of my youth, to build  
    Some tower of song with lofty parapet.  
5 Not indolence, nor pleasure, nor the fret  
    Of restless passions that would not be stilled,  
    But sorrow, and a care that almost killed,  
    Kept me from what I may accomplish yet;  
Though, half-way up the hill, I see the Past  
19 Lying beneath me with its sounds and sights,--  
    A city in the twilight dim and vast,  
With smoking roofs, soft bells, and gleaming lights,--  
    And hear above me on the autumnal blast  
The cataract<sup>2</sup> of Death far thundering from the heights.

1842 --Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

<sup>1</sup> The title is from the first line of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" ("Midway upon the journey of our life").

<sup>2</sup> A large waterfall



2008B Poems: "Hawk Roosting" (Ted Hughes) and "Golden Retrievals" (Mark Doty)

**Prompt:** The following two poems present animal-eye views of the world. Read each poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the techniques used in the poems to characterize the speakers and convey differing views of the world.

### HAWK ROOSTING

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.  
Inaction, no falsifying dream  
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:  
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

5 The convenience of the high trees!  
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray  
Are of advantage to me;  
And the earth's face upward for my  
inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.  
10 It took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -  
I kill where I please because it is all mine.

15 There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.  
For the one path of my flight is direct  
Through the bones of the living.

20 No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.

-- Ted Hughes

### GOLDEN RETRIEVALS

Fetch? Balls and sticks capture my attention  
seconds at a time. Catch? I don't think so.  
Bunny, tumbling leaf, a squirrel who's—oh  
joy—actually scared. Sniff the wind, then

5 I'm off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue  
of any thrillingly dead thing. And you?  
Either you're sunk in the past, half our walk,  
thinking of what you never can bring back,

or else you're off in some fog concerning  
10 —tomorrow, is that what you call it? My  
work:

to unsnare time's warp (and woof!),  
retrieving,  
my haze-headed friend, you. This shining  
bark,

a Zen master's bronzy gong, calls you here,  
entirely, now: bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-  
wow.

-- Mark Doty

2009 Speech from *Henry VIII* (William Shakespeare)

**Prompt:** In the following speech from Shakespeare's play *Henry VIII*, Cardinal Wolsey considers his sudden downfall from his position as advisor to the king. Spokesmen for the king have just left Wolsey alone on stage. Read the speech carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Shakespeare uses elements such as allusion, figurative language, and tone to convey Wolsey's complex response to his dismissal from court.

So farewell—to the little good you bear me.  
Farewell? a long farewell to all my greatness!  
This is the state of man: to-day he puts forth  
The tender leaves of hopes, to-morrow blossoms,  
5 And bears his blushing honors thick upon him;  
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost,  
And when he thinks, good easy man, full surely  
His greatness is a-ripening, nips his root,  
And then he falls as I do. I have ventur'd,  
10 Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders,<sup>1</sup>  
This many summers in a sea of glory,  
But far beyond my depth. My high-blown pride  
At length broke under me, and now has left me,  
Weary and old with service, to the mercy  
15 Of a rude stream that must for ever hide me.  
Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye!  
I feel my heart new open'd. O how wretched  
Is that poor man that hangs on princes' favors!  
There is, betwixt that smile we would aspire to,  
20 That sweet aspect of princes, and their ruin,  
More pangs and fears than wars or women have;  
And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer,<sup>2</sup>  
Never to hope again.

<sup>1</sup> air-filled sacs

<sup>2</sup> Satan, the fallen angel

2009B Poem: "Icarus" (Edward Field)

**Prompt:** The following poem, written by Edward Field, makes use of the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus.\* Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Field employs literary devices in adapting the Icarus myth to a contemporary setting.

*Icarus*

Only the feathers floating around the hat  
Showed that anything more spectacular had occurred  
Than the usual drowning. The police preferred to ignore  
The confusing aspects of the case,  
5 And the witnesses ran off to a gang war.  
So the report filed and forgotten in the archives read simply  
"Drowned," but it was wrong: Icarus  
Had swum away, coming at last to the city  
Where he rented a house and tended the garden.  
10 "That nice Mr. Hicks" the neighbors called him,  
Never dreaming that the gray, respectable suit  
Concealed arms that had controlled huge wings  
Nor that those sad, defeated eyes had once  
Compelled the sun. And had he told them  
15 They would have answered with a shocked, uncomprehending stare.  
No, he could not disturb their neat front yards;  
Yet all his books insisted that this was a horrible mistake:  
What was he doing aging in a suburb?  
Can the genius of the hero fall  
20 To the middling stature of the merely talented?  
And nightly Icarus probes his wound  
And daily in his workshop, curtains carefully drawn,  
Constructs small wings and tries to fly  
To the lighting fixture on the ceiling:  
25 Fails every time and hates himself for trying.  
He had thought himself a hero, had acted heroically,  
And dreamt of his fall, the tragic fall of the hero;  
But now rides commuter trains,  
Serves on various committees,  
30 And wishes he had drowned.

\* Daedalus and his son, Icarus, fashioned wings of feathers and wax in an attempt to escape from prison by flying across the sea. Before their flight, Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun. But, caught up in the experience of flying, Icarus ignored the warning and soared upward. The heat of the sun melted the wax, the wings fell off, and he plunged to his death in the sea

2010 Poem: "The Century Quilt" (Marilyn Nelson Waniek)

## AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

**Prompt:** Read carefully the following poem by Marilyn Nelson Waniek. Then write an essay analyzing how Waniek uses literary techniques to develop the complex meanings that the speaker attributes to The Century Quilt. You may wish to consider such elements as structure, imagery, and tone.

### The Century Quilt *for Sarah Mary Taylor, Quilter*

My sister and I were in love  
with Meema's Indian blanket.  
We fell asleep under army green  
issued to Daddy by Supply.  
5 When Meema came to live with us  
she brought her medicines, her cane,  
and the blanket I found on my sister's bed  
the last time I visited her.  
I remembered how I'd planned to inherit  
10 that blanket, how we used to wrap ourselves  
at play in its folds and be chieftains  
and princesses.

Now I've found a quilt<sup>1</sup>  
I'd like to die under;  
15 Six Van Dyke brown squares,  
two white ones, and one square  
the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks.  
Each square holds a sweet gum leaf  
whose fingers I imagine  
20 would caress me into the silence.

I think I'd have good dreams  
for a hundred years under this quilt,  
as Meema must have, under her blanket,  
dreamed she was a girl again in Kentucky  
among her yellow sisters,  
their grandfather's white family  
nodding at them when they met.  
When their father came home from his store  
they cranked up the pianola  
30 and all of the beautiful sisters  
giggled and danced.  
She must have dreamed about Mama  
when the dancing was over:  
lanky girl trailing after her father  
35 through his Oklahoma field.  
Perhaps under this quilt  
I'd dream of myself,  
of my childhood of miracles,  
of my father's burnt umber<sup>2</sup> pride,  
40 my mother's ochre<sup>3</sup> gentleness.  
Within the dream of myself  
perhaps I'd meet my son  
or my other child, as yet unconceived.  
I'd call it The Century Quilt,  
45 after its pattern of leaves.

<sup>1</sup> A quilt is a type of bedcovering often made by stitching together varied pieces of fabric.

<sup>2</sup> Burnt umber is a shade of brown.

<sup>3</sup> Ochre refers to a shade of yellow.

2010B Poems: “To Sir John Lade, on His Coming of Age” (Samuel Johnson) and “When I Was One-and-Twenty” (A. E. Housman)

**Prompt:** Each of the two poems below is concerned with a young man at the age of twenty-one, traditionally the age of adulthood. Read the two poems carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you compare and contrast the poems, analyzing the poetic techniques, such as point of view and tone, that each writer uses to make his point about coming of age.

**To Sir John Lade, on His Coming of Age**  
(‘A Short Song of Congratulation’)

Scorn their counsel and their pother,\*  
You can hang or drown at last.

Long-expected one and twenty  
Lingering year at last is flown,  
Pomp and pleasure, pride and plenty,  
Great Sir John, are all your own.

1780 —Samuel Johnson (1709–  
1784)

- fuss

5 Loosened from the minor’s tether,  
Free to mortgage or to sell,  
Wild as wind, and light as feather,  
Bid the slaves of thrift farewell.

**When I Was One-and-Twenty**

10 Call the Bettys, Kates, and Jennys,  
Every name that laughs at care,  
Lavish of your grandsire’s guineas,  
Show the spirit of an heir.

When I was one-and-twenty  
I heard a wise man say,  
‘Give crowns and pounds and guineas  
But not your heart away;  
5 Give pearls away and rubies  
But keep your fancy free.’  
But I was one-and-twenty,  
No use to talk to me.

All that prey on vice and folly  
Joy to see their quarry fly,  
15 Here the gamester light and jolly,  
There the lender grave and sly.

Wealth, Sir John, was made to wander,  
Let it wander as it will;  
See the jockey, see the pander,  
20 Bid them come, and take their fill.

When I was one-and-twenty  
10 I heard him say again,  
‘The heart out of the bosom  
Was never given in vain;  
’Tis paid with sighs a plenty  
And sold for endless rue.’  
15 And I am two-and-twenty,  
And oh, ’tis true, ’tis true.

When the bonny blade carouses,  
Pockets full, and spirits high,  
What are acres? What are houses?  
Only dirt, or wet or dry.

25 If the guardian or the mother  
Tell the woes of wilful waste,

1896 —A. E. Housman (1859–  
1936)

2011 Poem: "A Story" (Li-Young Lee)

**Prompt:** The following poem is by the contemporary poet Li-Young Lee. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how the poet conveys the complex relationship of the father and the son through the use of literary devices such as point of view and structure.

*A Story*

Sad is the man who is asked for a story  
and can't come up with one.

His five-year-old son waits in his lap.  
*Not the same story, Baba. A new one.*

5 The man rubs his chin, scratches his ear.

In a room full of books in a world  
of stories, he can recall  
not one, and soon, he thinks, the boy  
will give up on his father.

10 Already the man lives far ahead, he sees  
the day this boy will go. *Don't go!*  
*Hear the alligator story! The angel story once more!*  
*You love the spider story. You laugh at the spider.*  
*Let me tell it!*

15 But the boy is packing his shirts,  
he is looking for his keys. *Are you a god,*  
*the man screams, that I sit mute before you?*  
*Am I a god that I should never disappoint?*

20 But the boy is here. *Please, Baba, a story?*  
It is an emotional rather than logical equation,  
an earthly rather than heavenly one,  
which posits that a boy's supplications  
and a father's love add up to silence.

Li-Young Lee, "A Story" from *The City in Which I Love You*.

AP English Literature and Composition Test Poetry Essay Questions with Poems

2011B Poem: "An Echo Sonnet" (Robert Pack)

**Prompt:** Read carefully the following poem by Robert Pack, paying close attention to the relationship between form and meaning. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the literary techniques used in this poem contribute to its meaning.

AN ECHO SONNET  
To an Empty Page

	Voice:	Echo:
	How from emptiness can I make a start?	Start
	And starting, must I master joy or grief?	Grief
	But is there consolation in the heart?	Art
	Oh cold reprieve, where's natural relief?	Leaf
5	Leaf blooms, burns red before delighted eyes.	Dies
	Here beauty makes of dying, ecstasy.	See
	Yet what's the end of our life's long disease?	Ease
	If death is not, who is my enemy?	Me
	Then are you glad that I must end in sleep?	Leap
10	I'd leap into the dark if dark were true.	True
	And in that night would you rejoice or weep?	Weep
	What contradiction makes you take this view?	You
	I feel your calling leads me where I go.	Go
	But whether happiness is there, you know.	No

## AP Literature Prose Essay Prompts (1970–2011)

**NOTE:** From 1956 (the first official administration of AP tests) through 1979, all AP English examinees took the same test. In 1980, separate Language and Literature exams began to be offered. The passages for the following prose essay prompts are from a variety of novels, essays, short stories, and nonfiction sources.

- 1970 Meredith’s “Ferdinand and Miranda” from *The Ordeal of Richard Fernald*: Show how the young woman and the young man in the passage are made to seem naturally suited for one another.
- 1971 Orwell’s “Some Thoughts on the Common Toad”: Demonstrate how the speaker establishes his attitude toward the coming of spring.
- 1972 Joyce’s “Eveline” from *Dubliners*: Explain how the author prepares his reader for Eveline’s final inability or unwillingness to sail to South America with Frank. Consider at least two elements of fictions such as theme, symbol, setting, image, characterization, or any other aspects of the narrative artist’s craft.
- 1973 Dickens’ *Hard Times*: Explain how the author’s presentation of details is intended to shape the reader’s attitudes toward the place he describes — Coketown and the caves. Give specific attention to the function of word choice, imagery, phrasing, and sentence structure.
- 1974 Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*: In the opening lines of the passage we are told the “new arrangement was inevitably confounding” to Maisie. Write a descriptive or narrative piece which presents a person who is undergoing a new experience that is confounding.
- 1975 Lagerkvist’s *The Marriage Feast*: Define and discuss the subject of the story. Direct your remarks to the significance of the events described.
- 1976 Work/author unknown: Characterize briefly the world and way of life described in the passage, discuss the effect of the passage as a whole, and analyze those elements that achieve this effect.
- 1977 No prose selection (instead, had the following prompt: A character’s attempt to recapture or reject the past is important in many plays, novels, and poems. Choose a work in which a character views the past with such feelings as reverence, bitterness, or longing. Show with clear evidence how the character’s view of the past is used to develop a theme in the work.)
- 1978 Johnson’s “Review of ‘A Free Enquiry Into The Nature and Origin of Evil’”: Analyze Samuel Johnson’s attitude toward writer Soame Jenyns and treatment of Jenyns’ argument.
- 1979 Quentin Bell on the Woolf family: Show how style reveals feelings about family.
- 1980 Two funerals: Compare the different authors’ attitudes by examining diction and choice of detail; also discuss their effect on the reader.



- 1981 George Bernard Shaw on his mother's cremation: Analyze how diction and detail convey attitude.
- 1982 Stevenson's "Cat Bill": Analyze strategies that make the argument effective for his audience.
- 1983 Thomas Carlyle's "Work": Examine how he uses language to convince the reader of the rightness of his position.
- 1984 Austen's *Emma*: Explain how passage characterizes Emma more than Harriet.  
Mailer's "Death of Benny Paret": Explain and analyze effect on reader and how diction, syntax, imagery, and tone produce that effect. (Two prose prompts; no poem)
- 1985 Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: Compare two drafts of a passage from *A Farewell to Arms* and analyze the effect of revisions.
- 1986 Dickens' *Dombey and Son*: Define narrator's attitude toward characters through imagery, diction, narrative structure, choice of detail.
- 1987 George Eliot's "Leisure" from *Adam Bede*: Describe her two views of leisure and discuss stylistic devices she uses to convey those views.
- 1988 Updike's "Reunion": Analyze blend of humor, pathos, and grotesque in their story.
- 1989 Conrad's "Captain MacWhirr" from *Typhoon*: Define attitude of speaker toward Captain and analyze techniques he uses to define Captain's character.
- 1990 Didion's "Self-deception - Self-respect": Show how style and tone help convey attitude.
- 1991 Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*: Discuss the ways Boswell differentiates between the writing of Addison and Johnson.
- 1992 Beginning and ending of Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing": Analyze the narrative techniques and other resources of language Olsen uses to characterize the mother and her attitude.
- 1993 Lytton Strachey's conception of Florence Nightingale: Define Strachey's view and analyze how he conveys it.
- 1994 Sarah Jewett's "A White Heron": Show how the author dramatizes the young heroine's adventure using diction, imagery, narrative pace, and point of view.
- 1995 Sandra Cisneros' "Eleven": Show how the author uses literary techniques to characterize Rachel.
- 1996 Hawthorne's "Judge Pyncheon" from *House of the Seven Gables*: Analyze how the narrator reveals the character of Judge Pyncheon. Emphasize such devices as tone, selection of detail, syntax, point of view.

- 1997 Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*: Analyze how changes in perspective and style reflect the narrator's complex attitude toward the past. Consider elements such as point of view, structure, selection of detail, and figurative language.
- 1998 George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: Write an essay in which you characterize the narrator's attitude toward Dorothea Brooke and analyze the literary techniques used to convey this attitude.
- 1999 Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*: Show how the author's techniques convey the impact of the experience on the main character.
- 2000 Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* (March 4, 1712): Analyze how the language of the passage characterizes the diarist and his society and how the characterization serves Addison's satiric purpose. Consider such elements as selection of detail, repetition, and tone.
- 2001 Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749): Analyze the techniques that Fielding employs in this scene to characterize Mr. Allworthy and Mrs. Deborah Wilkins.
- 2002 Alain de Botton's *Kiss and Tell*: Write an essay in which you analyze how the author produces a comic effect.
- 2002B Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*: Note the author's use of such elements as diction, syntax, imagery, and figurative language. Analyze how the author's use of language generates a vivid impression of Quoye as a character.
- 2003 Mavis Gallant's "The Other Paris": Explain how the author uses narrative voice and characterization to provide social commentary.
- 2003B Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaney*s (1996): Analyze the literary techniques Oates uses to characterize the speaker, Judd Mulvaney. Support with specific references to the passage.
- 2004 Henry James's "The Pupil" (1891): Analyze the author's depiction of the three characters and the relationships among them. Pay particular attention to tone and point of view.
- 2004B Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848): This is from a novel about mill workers living in Manchester, England, in the 1840's. Analyze how Gaskell uses elements such as point of view, selection of detail, dialogue, and characterization to make a social commentary.
- 2005 Katharine Brush's "Birthday Party" (1946): Write an essay in which you show how the author uses literary devices to achieve her purpose.
- 2005B Norris' *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*: Discuss how the characterization in the passage reflects the narrator's attitude toward McTeague. Consider such elements as diction, tone, detail, and syntax.

- 2006 Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892): Analyze how the playwright reveals the values of the characters and the nature of their society.
- 2006B From "a nineteenth-century novel": Discuss how the narrator's style reveals his attitudes toward the people he describes.
- 2007 Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*: Analyze how Trumbo uses such techniques as point of view, selection of detail, and syntax to characterize the relationship between the young man and his father.
- 2007B Seamus Deane reflecting on his childhood experiences with books and writing: Analyze how Deane conveys the impact those early experiences had on him.
- 2008 Aran from Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999): Analyze how the author uses such literary devices as speech and point of view to characterize Aran's experience.
- 2008B Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818): Analyze the literary techniques Austen uses to characterize Catherine Morland.
- 2009 Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946): Analyze how Petry establishes Lutie Johnson's relationship to the urban setting through the use of literary devices such as imagery, personification, selection of detail, and figurative language.
- 2009B Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948): Analyze the literary techniques Hurston uses to describe Sawley and to characterize the people who live there.
- 2010 Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801): The narrator provides a description of Clarence Harvey, one of the suitors of the novel's protagonist, Belinda Portman. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze Clarence Harvey's complex character as Edgeworth develops it through such literary techniques as tone, point of view, and language.
- 2010B Maxine Clair's "Cherry Bomb": Write an essay in which you analyze how Clair uses literary techniques to characterize the adult narrator's memories of her fifth-grade summer world.
- 2011 George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874): In the passage, Rosamond and Tertius Lydgate, a recently married couple, confront financial difficulties. Read the passage carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how Eliot portrays these two characters and their complex relationship as husband and wife. You may wish to consider such literary devices as narrative perspective and selection of detail.
- 2011B Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998): The following passage is the opening of the novel by the Cree novelist and playwright Tomson Highway. Read the passage carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Highway uses literary devices to dramatize Okimasis' experience.

Originally compiled and shared by Cheryl DeLacretaz, Dripping Springs High School, Dripping Springs, TX

## AP Literature Open-ended Prompts (1970-2011)

1970. Choose a character from a novel or play of recognized literary merit and write an essay in which you (a) briefly describe the standards of the fictional society in which the character exists and (b) show how the character is affected by and responds to those standards. In your essay do not merely summarize the plot.

1971. The significance of a title such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is so easy to discover. However, in other works (for example, *Measure for Measure*) the full significance of the title becomes apparent to the reader only gradually. Choose two works and show how the significance of their respective titles is developed through the authors' use of devices such as contrast, repetition, allusion, and point of view.

1972. In retrospect, the reader often discovers that the first chapter of a novel or the opening scene of a drama introduces some of the major themes of the work. Write an essay about the opening scene of a drama or the first chapter of a novel in which you explain how it functions in this way.

1973. An effective literary work does not merely stop or cease; it concludes. In the view of some critics, a work that does not provide the pleasure of significant closure has terminated with an artistic fault. A satisfactory ending is not, however, always conclusive in every sense; significant closure may require the reader to abide with or adjust to ambiguity and uncertainty. In an essay, discuss the ending of a novel or play of acknowledged literary merit. Explain precisely how and why the ending appropriately or inappropriately concludes the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1974. Choose a work of literature written before 1900. Write an essay in which you present arguments for and against the work's relevance for a person in 1974. Your own position should emerge in the course of your essay. You may refer to works of literature written after 1900 for the purpose of contrast or comparison.

1975. Although literary critics have tended to praise the unique in literary characterizations, many authors have employed the stereotyped character successfully. Select one work of acknowledged literary merit and in a well-written essay, show how the conventional or stereotyped character or characters function to achieve the author's purpose.

1975, #2. Unlike the novelist, the writer of a play does not use his own voice and only rarely uses a narrator's voice to guide the audience's responses to character and action. Select a play you have read and write an essay in which you explain the techniques the playwright uses to guide his audience's responses to the central characters and the action. You might consider the effect on the audience of things like setting, the use of comparable and contrasting characters, and the characters' responses to each other. Support your argument with specific references to the play. Do not give a plot summary.

1976. The conflict created when the will of an individual opposes the will of the majority is the recurring theme of many novels, plays, and essays. Select the work of an essayist who is in opposition to his or her society; or from a work of recognized literary merit, select a fictional character who is in opposition to his or her society. In a critical essay, analyze the conflict and discuss the moral and ethical implications for both the individual and the society. Do not summarize the plot or action of the work you choose.

1977. A character's attempt to recapture the past is important in many plays, novels, and poems. Choose a literary work in which a character views the past with such feelings as reverence, bitterness, or longing. Show with clear evidence from the work how the character's view of the past is used to develop a theme in the work. You may base your essay on a work by one of the following authors, or you may choose a work of another author of comparable literary excellence.

1977, #2. In some novels and plays certain parallel or recurring events prove to be significant. In an essay, describe the major similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in a novel or play and discuss the significance of such events. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1978. Choose an implausible or strikingly unrealistic incident or character in a work of fiction or drama of recognized literary merit. Write an essay that explains how the incident or character is related to the more realistic or plausible elements in the rest of the work. Avoid plot summary.

1979. Choose a complex and important character in a novel or a play of recognized literary merit who might on the basis of the character's actions alone be considered evil or immoral. In a well-organized essay, explain both how and why the full presentation of the character in the work makes us react more sympathetically than we otherwise might. Avoid plot summary.

1980. A recurring theme in literature is the classic war between a passion and responsibility. For instance, a personal cause, a love, a desire for revenge, a determination to redress a wrong, or some other emotion or drive may conflict with moral duty. Choose a literary work in which a character confronts the demands of a private passion that conflicts with his or her responsibilities. In a well-written essay show clearly the nature of the conflict, its effects upon the character, and its significance to the work.

1981. The meaning of some literary works is often enhanced by sustained allusion to myths, the Bible, or other works of literature. Select a literary work that makes use of such a sustained reference. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain the allusion that predominates in the work and analyze how it enhances the work's meaning.

1982. In great literature, no scene of violence exists for its own sake. Choose a work of literary merit that confronts the reader or audience with a scene or scenes of violence. In a well-organized essay, explain how the scene or scenes contribute to the meaning of the complete work. Avoid plot summary.

1982 Bulletin #1. "The struggle to achieve dominance over others frequently appears in fiction." Choose a novel in which such a struggle for dominance occurs, and write an essay showing for what purposes the author uses the struggle. Do not merely retell the story.

1982 Bulletin #2. "In many plays a character has a misconception of himself or his world. Destroying or perpetuating this illusion contributes to a central theme of the play." Choose a play with a major character to whom this statement applies, and write an essay in which you consider the following:

- (1) What the character's illusion is and how it differs from reality as presented in the play.
- (2) How the destruction or perpetuation of the illusion develops a theme of the play.

Do not merely retell the story.

1983. From a novel or play of literary merit, select an important character who is a villain. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the nature of the character's villainy and show how it enhances meaning in the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1984. Select a line or so of poetry, or a moment or scene in a novel, epic poem, or play that you find especially memorable. Write an essay in which you identify the line or the passage, explain its relationship to the work in which it is found, and analyze the reasons for its effectiveness.

1985. A critic has said that one important measure of a superior work of literature is its ability to produce in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude. Select a literary work that produces this "healthy confusion." Write an essay in which you explain the sources of the "pleasure and disquietude" experienced by the readers of the work.

1986. Some works of literature use the element of time in a distinct way. The chronological sequence of events may be altered, or time may be suspended or accelerated. Choose a novel, an epic, or a play of recognized literary merit and show how the author's manipulation of time contributes to the effectiveness of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1987. Some novels and plays seem to advocate changes in social or political attitudes or in traditions. Choose such a novel or play and note briefly the particular attitudes or traditions that the author apparently wishes to modify. Then analyze the techniques the author uses to influence the reader's or audience's views. Avoid plot summary.

1988. Choose a distinguished novel or play in which some of the most significant events are mental or psychological; for example, awakenings, discoveries, changes in consciousness. In a well-organized essay, describe how the author manages to give these internal events the sense of excitement, suspense, and climax usually associated with external action. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1989. In questioning the value of literary realism, Flannery O'Connor has written, "I am interested in making a good case for distortion because I am coming to believe that it is the only way to make people see." Write an essay in which you "make a good case for distortion," as distinct from literary realism. Analyze how important elements of the work you choose are "distorted" and explain how these distortions contribute to the effectiveness of the work. Avoid plot summary.

1990. Choose a novel or play that depicts a conflict between a parent (or a parental figure) and a son or daughter. Write an essay in which you analyze the sources of the conflict and explain how the conflict contributes to the meaning of the work. Avoid plot summary.

1991. Many plays and novels use contrasting places (for example, two countries, two cities or towns, two houses, or the land and the sea) to represent opposed forces or ideas that are central to the meaning of the work. Choose a novel or play that contrasts two such places. Write an essay explaining how the places differ, what each place represents, and how their contrast contributes to the meaning of the work.

1992. In a novel or play, a confidant (male) or a confidante (female) is a character, often a friend or relative of the hero or heroine, whose role is to be present when the hero or heroine needs a sympathetic listener to confide in. Frequently the result is, as Henry James remarked, that the confidant or confidante can be as much “the reader’s friend as the protagonist’s.” However, the author sometimes uses this character for other purposes as well. Choose a confidant or confidante from a novel or play of recognized literary merit and write an essay in which you discuss the various ways this character functions in the work. You may write your essay on one of the following novels or plays or on another of comparable quality. Do not write on a poem or short story.

1993. “The true test of comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter.” Choose a novel, play, or long poem in which a scene or character awakens “thoughtful laughter” in the reader. Write an essay in which you show why this laughter is “thoughtful” and how it contributes to the meaning of the work.

1994. In some works of literature, a character who appears briefly, or does not appear at all, is a significant presence. Choose a novel or play of literary merit and write an essay in which you show how such a character functions in the work. You may wish to discuss how the character affects action, theme, or the development of other characters. Avoid plot summary.

1995. Writers often highlight the values of a culture or a society by using characters who are alienated from that culture or society because of gender, race, class, or creed. Choose a novel or a play in which such a character plays a significant role and show how that character’s alienation reveals the surrounding society’s assumptions or moral values.

1996. The British novelist Fay Weldon offers this observation about happy endings. “The writers, I do believe, who get the best and most lasting response from their readers are the writers who offer a happy ending through moral development. By a happy ending, I do not mean mere fortunate events—a marriage or a last minute rescue from death—but some kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation, even with the self, even at death.” Choose a novel or play that has the kind of ending Weldon describes. In a well-written essay, identify the “spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation” evident in the ending and explain its significance in the work as a whole.

1997. Novels and plays often include scenes of weddings, funerals, parties, and other social occasions. Such scenes may reveal the values of the characters and the society in which they live. Select a novel or play that includes such a scene and, in a focused essay, discuss the contribution the scene makes to the meaning of the work as a whole. You may choose a work from the list below or another novel or play of literary merit.

1998. In his essay “Walking,” Henry David Thoreau offers the following assessment of literature:

In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tameness. It is the uncivilized free and wild thinking in *Hamlet* and *The Iliad*, in all scriptures and mythologies, not learned in schools, that delights us.

From the works that you have studied in school, choose a novel, play, or epic poem that you may initially have thought was conventional and tame but that you now value for its “uncivilized free and wild thinking.” Write an essay in which you explain what constitutes its “uncivilized free and wild thinking” and how that thinking is central to the value of the work as a whole. Support your ideas with specific references to the work you choose.

1999. The eighteenth-century British novelist Laurence Sterne wrote, “No body, but he who has felt it, can conceive what a plaguing thing it is to have a man’s mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time.”

From a novel or play choose a character (not necessarily the protagonist) whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify each of the two conflicting forces and explain how this conflict with one character illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. You may use one of the novels or plays listed below or another novel or work of similar literary quality.

2000. Many works of literature not readily identified with the mystery or detective story genre nonetheless involve the investigation of a mystery. In these works, the solution to the mystery may be less important than the knowledge gained in the process of its investigation. Choose a novel or play in which one or more of the characters confront a mystery. Then write an essay in which you identify the mystery and explain how the investigation illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2001. One definition of madness is “mental delusion or the eccentric behavior arising from it.” But Emily Dickinson wrote

Much madness is divinest Sense—  
To a discerning Eye—

Novelists and playwrights have often seen madness with a “discerning Eye.” Select a novel or play in which a character’s apparent madness or irrational behavior plays an important role. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain what this delusion or eccentric behavior consists of and how it might be judged reasonable. Explain the significance of the “madness” to the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2002. Morally ambiguous characters – characters whose behavior discourages readers from identifying them as purely evil or purely good – are at the heart of many works of literature. Choose a novel or play in which a morally ambiguous character plays a pivotal role. Then write an essay in which you explain how the character can be viewed as morally ambiguous and why his or her moral ambiguity is significant to the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2002, Form B. Often in literature, a character’s success in achieving goals depends on keeping a secret and divulging it only at the right moment, if at all. Choose a novel or play of literary merit that requires a character to keep a secret. In a well-organized essay, briefly explain the necessity for secrecy and how the character’s choice to reveal or keep the secret affects the plot and contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. You may select a work from the list below, or you may choose another work of recognized literary merit suitable to the topic. Do NOT write about a short story, poem, or film.

2003. According to critic Northrop Frye, “Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divisive lightning.” Select a novel or play in which a tragic figure functions as an instrument of the suffering of others. Then write an essay in which you explain how the suffering brought upon others by that figure contributes to the tragic vision of the work as a whole.

2003, Form B. Novels and plays often depict characters caught between colliding cultures -- national, regional, ethnic, religious, institutional. Such collisions can call a character’s sense of identity into question. Select a novel or play in which a character responds to such a cultural collision. Then write a well-organized essay in which you describe the character’s response and explain its relevance to the work as a whole.

2004. Critic Roland Barthes has said, “Literature is the question minus the answer.” Choose a novel, or play, and, considering Barthes’ observation, write an essay in which you analyze a central question the work raises and the extent to which it offers answers. Explain how the author’s treatment of this question affects your understanding of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2004, Form B. The most important themes in literature are sometimes developed in scenes in which a death or deaths take place. Choose a novel or play and write a well-organized essay in which you show how a specific death scene helps to illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2005. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), protagonist Edna Pontellier is said to possess “That outward existence which conforms, the inward life that questions.” In a novel or play that you have studied, identify a character who outwardly conforms while questioning inwardly. Then write an essay in which you analyze how this tension between outward conformity and inward questioning contributes to the meaning of the work. Avoid mere plot summary.

2005, Form B. One of the strongest human drives seems to be a desire for power. Write an essay in which you discuss how a character in a novel or a drama struggles to free himself or herself from the power of others or seeks to gain power over others. Be sure to demonstrate in your essay how the author uses this power struggle to enhance the meaning of the work.

2006. Many writers use a country setting to establish values within a work of literature. For example, the country may be a place of virtue and peace or one of primitivism and ignorance. Choose a novel or play in which such a setting plays a significant role. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the country setting functions in the work as a whole.

2006, Form B. In many works of literature, a physical journey – the literal movement from one place to another – plays a central role. Choose a novel, play, or epic poem in which a physical journey is an important element and discuss how the journey adds to the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2007. In many works of literature, past events can affect, positively or negatively, the present activities, attitudes, or values of a character. Choose a novel or play in which a character must contend with some aspect of the past, either personal or societal. Then write an essay in which you show how the character's relationship to the past contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

2007, Form B. Works of literature often depict acts of betrayal. Friends and even family may betray a protagonist; main characters may likewise be guilty of treachery or may betray their own values. Select a novel or play that includes such acts of betrayal. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the nature of the betrayal and show how it contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

2008. In a literary work, a minor character, often known as a foil, possesses traits that emphasize, by contrast or comparison, the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the main character. For example, the ideas or behavior of a minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character. Choose a novel or play in which a minor character serves as a foil for the main character. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the relation between the minor character and the major character illuminates the meaning of the work.

2008, Form B. In some works of literature, childhood and adolescence are portrayed as times graced by innocence and a sense of wonder; in other works, they are depicted as times of tribulation and terror. Focusing on a single novel or play, explain how its representation of childhood or adolescence shapes the meaning of the work as a whole.

2009. A symbol is an object, action, or event that represents something or that creates a range of associations beyond itself. In literary works a symbol can express an idea, clarify meaning, or enlarge literal meaning. Select a novel or play and, focusing on one symbol, write an essay analyzing how that symbol functions in the work and what it reveals about the characters or themes of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2009, Form B. Many works of literature deal with political or social issues. Choose a novel or play that focuses on a political or social issue. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the author uses literary elements to explore this issue and explain how the issue contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2010. Palestinian American literary theorist and cultural critic Edward Said has written that "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted." Yet Said has also said that exile can become "a potent, even enriching" experience. Select a novel, play, or epic in which a character experiences such a rift and becomes cut off from "home," whether that home is the character's birthplace, family, homeland, or other special place. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the character's experience with exile is both alienating and enriching, and how this experience illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2010, Form B. "You can leave home all you want, but home will never leave you." —Sonsyrea Tate

Sonsyrea Tate's statement suggests that "home" may be conceived of as a dwelling, a place, or a state of mind. It may have positive or negative associations, but in either case, it may have a considerable influence on an individual. Choose a novel or play in which a central character leaves home yet finds that home remains significant. Write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the importance of "home" to this character and the reasons for its continuing influence. Explain how the character's idea of home illuminates the larger meaning of the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2011. In a novel by William Styron, a father tells his son that life "is a search for justice."

Choose a character from a novel or play who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the character's understanding of justice, the degree to which the character's search for justice is successful, and the significance of this search for the work as a whole.

2011, Form B. In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), novelist Edith Wharton states the following:

At every stage in the progress of his tale the novelist must rely on what may be called the illuminating incident to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation. Illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity.

Choose a novel or play that you have studied and write a well-organized essay in which you describe an "illuminating" episode or moment and explain how it functions as a "casement," a window that opens onto the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.



## *Thirty years of AP Open Questions! (condensed)*

**\*IMPORTANT:** ALL of the questions below ask you to:

- Show HOW what you're discussing relates to the work's over-all significance
- Choose a work of literary merit on or off the list provided
- Avoid plot summary!

### **General:**

1. Significance of a title
2. The author's manipulation of time
3. A predominant allusion in a work
4. Particular social attitudes or traditions that the author apparently wishes to change
5. Opening scene of a work
6. Conflict between a parent (or a parental figure) and a son or daughter
7. How contrasting places (for example, two countries, two houses) represent opposed forces or ideas
8. Arguments for or against the work's relevance in today's world
9. Similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in a work
10. Implausible or unrealistic incident or character - how it relates to the realistic elements in the work
11. Character who confronts a mystery - identify the mystery and its investigation
12. Internal events (mental/psychological) - how they impact external action in a work

### **Scene:**

1. A scene or scenes of violence
2. A scene of social occasion (wedding, funeral, party...) – how it shows the values of the character /society
4. A line or passage in a work and the reasons for its significance and effectiveness
5. How and why an ending appropriately or inappropriately concludes the work

### **Based on quotes about literature:**

1. "Spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation" evident in the ending of a work
2. A work which you initially considered conventional, but now see as "uncivilized free and wild thinking"
3. Explain the "pleasure and disquietude" experienced by the readers of a particular work
4. A scene or character which awakens "thoughtful laughter" in the reader
5. How and why important elements of a work are "distorted"

### **Character:**

1. How and why a particular immoral character in a work makes us react sympathetically
2. Characters alienated from society because of gender, race, class, or creed - how that alienation reveals society's assumptions or moral values
3. Character whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires or influences
4. Character who appears briefly, or does not appear at all, but has a significant presence
5. The nature of a character's villainy
6. Character's conflict between a private passion and a social responsibility
7. A conventional or stereotyped character's function in achieving the author's purpose
8. A rebel's conflict and its ethical implications for the individual and society
9. The function of a confidant/e in a work