

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 Feverel*: 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.

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