

Exam Overview

The AP English Literature and Composition Exam assesses student understanding of the skills and essential knowledge outlined in the course framework. The exam is 3 hours long and includes 55 multiple-choice questions and 3 free-response questions. The details of the exam, including exam weighting and timing, can be found below:

Section	Question Type	Number of Questions	Exam Weighting	Timing
I	Multiple-choice questions	55	45%	60 minutes
II	Free-response questions	3	55%	2 hours

Question 1: Poetry Analysis (6 points)	40 minutes recommended per essay
Question 2: Prose Fiction Analysis (6 points)	
Question 3: Literary Argument (6 points)	

The exam assesses the six big ideas of the course:

Character

Setting

Structure

Narration

Figurative Language

Literary Argumentation

The exam also assesses the nine units of the course, listed below with their approximate weighting on the multiple-choice section of the exam:

Units	Exam Weighting
Short Fiction (Units 1, 4, 7)	42–49%
Poetry (Units 2, 5, 8)	36–45%
Longer Fiction or Drama (Units 3, 6, 9)	15–18%

The exam relies on texts from a variety of time periods. The exam includes a higher number of 20th-century and contemporary texts than texts published prior to the 20th century.

How Student Learning Is Assessed on the AP Exam

Section I: Multiple-Choice

The seven AP English Literature and Composition skill categories are assessed in the multiple-choice section with the following weighting:

Skill Category	Exam Weighting
<i>1: Explain the function of character</i>	16–20%
<i>2: Explain the function of setting</i>	3–6%
<i>3: Explain the function of plot and structure</i>	16–20%
<i>4: Explain the function of the narrator or speaker</i>	21–26%
<i>5: Explain the function of word choice, imagery, and symbols</i>	10–13%
<i>6: Explain the function of comparison</i>	10–13%
<i>7: Develop textually substantiated arguments about interpretations of part or all of a text</i>	10–13%

The multiple-choice section will include five sets of 8 to 13 questions per set, with each set preceded by a passage of prose fiction or poetry of varying difficulty. Each multiple-choice section will include at least two prose fiction passages and at least two poetry passages.

Section II: Free-Response

The second section of the AP English Literature and Composition Exam includes three questions.

FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 1: POETRY ANALYSIS

Free-response question 1 presents students with a passage of poetry of approximately 100 to 300 words. This question assesses students' ability to do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents an interpretation and may establish a line of reasoning.
- Select and use evidence to develop and support the line of reasoning.
- Explain the relationship between the evidence and the thesis.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating the argument.

Sample Question

In the following poem "Plants" by Olive Senior (published in 2005), the speaker portrays the relationships among plant life and the implied audience. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Senior uses poetic elements and techniques to develop those complex relationships.

Stable Prompt Wording

The text in italics will vary by question, while the remainder of the prompt will be consistently used in all Poetry Analysis essay questions.

In the following poem [*or excerpt from poem*] by [*author, date of publication*], the speaker [*comment on what is being addressed in the poem*]. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [*author*] uses [*poetic or literary*] elements and techniques to [*convey/portray/develop a thematic, topical, or structural aspect of the poem that is complex and specific to the passage of the poem provided*].

FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 2: PROSE FICTION ANALYSIS

Free-response question 2 presents students with a passage of prose fiction of approximately 500 to 700 words. This question assesses students' ability to do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents an interpretation and may establish a line of reasoning.
- Select and use evidence to develop and support the line of reasoning.
- Explain the relationship between the evidence and the thesis.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating the argument.

Sample Question

The following excerpt is from an 1852 novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne. In this passage, two characters who have been living on the Blithedale farm—a community designed to promote an ideal of equality achieved through communal rural living—are about to part ways. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Hawthorne uses literary elements and techniques to portray the narrator's complex attitude towards Zenobia.

Stable Prompt wording

The text in italics will vary by question, while the remainder of the prompt will be consistently used in all Prose Fiction Analysis essay questions.

The following excerpt is from [*text and author, date of publication*]. In this passage, [*comment on what is being addressed in the passage*]. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [*author*] uses literary elements and techniques to [*convey/portray/develop a thematic, topical, or structural aspect of the passage that is complex and specific to the passage provided*].

FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 3: LITERARY ARGUMENT

Free-response question 3 presents students with a literary concept or idea, along with a list of approximately 40 literary works. Students are required to select a work of prose fiction either from their own reading or from the provided list and analyze how the literary concept or idea described in the question contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. This question assesses students' ability to do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents an interpretation and may establish a line of reasoning.
- Select and use evidence to develop and support the line of reasoning.
- Explain the relationship between the evidence and the thesis.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating the argument.

Sample Question

Many works of literature feature characters who have been given a literal or figurative gift. The gift may be an object, or it may be a quality such as uncommon beauty, significant social position, great mental or imaginative faculties, or extraordinary physical powers. Yet this gift is often also a burden or a handicap.

Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which a character has been given a gift that is both an advantage and a problem. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the gift and its complex nature contribute to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Stable Prompt Wording

The text in italics will vary by question, while the remainder of the prompt will be consistently used in all Literary Argument essay questions.

[*Lead that introduces some concept or idea that students will be asked to apply to a text of their choosing.*]

Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which [*some aspect of the lead is addressed*]. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [*that same aspect of the lead*] contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Task Verbs Used in Free-Response Questions

The following task verbs are commonly used in the free-response questions:

Analyze: Examine methodically and in detail the structure of the topic of the question for purposes of interpretation and explanation.

Choose: Select a literary work from among provided choices.

Read: Look at or view printed directions and provided passages.

Sample Exam Questions

The sample exam questions that follow illustrate the relationship between the course framework and the AP English Literature and Composition Exam and serve as examples of the types of questions that appear on the exam. After the sample questions is an answer key and alignment table that shows how the questions relate to the course framework.

Section I: Multiple-Choice

Questions 1–10 refer to the passage.

The following passage is excerpted from a novel first published in 1853.

There is an assize-town¹ in one of the eastern counties which was much distinguished by the Tudor sovereigns, and, in consequence of their favour and protection, attained a degree of importance that surprises the
Line 5 modern traveler.

A hundred years ago, its appearance was that of picturesque grandeur. The old houses, which were the temporary residences of such of the county-families as contented themselves with the gaieties of a provincial
10 town, crowded the streets and gave them the irregular but noble appearance yet to be seen in the cities of Belgium. The sides of the streets had a quaint richness, from the effect of the gables, and the stacks of chimneys which cut against the blue sky above; while, if the eye fell lower
15 down, the attention was arrested by all kinds of projections in the shape of balcony and oriel²; and it was amusing to see the infinite variety of windows that had been crammed into the walls long before Mr Pitt's³ days of taxation. The streets below suffered from all these
20 projections and advanced stories above; they were dark, and ill-paved with large, round, jolting pebbles, and with no side-path protected by kerbstones; there were no lamp-posts for long winter nights; and no regard was paid to the wants of the middle class, who neither drove
25 about in coaches of their own, nor were carried by their own men in their own sedans into the very halls of their friends. The professional men and their wives, the shopkeepers and their spouses, and all such people, walked about at considerable peril both night and day.

¹ a locus of judicial authority in Great Britain

² a type of window

³ William Pitt the Younger was a British prime minister.

30 The broad unwieldy carriages hemmed them up against
the houses in the narrow streets. The inhospitable houses
projected their flights of steps almost into the
carriage-way, forcing pedestrians again into the danger
they had avoided for twenty or thirty paces. Then, at
35 night, the only light was derived from the glaring, flaring
oil-lamps hung above the doors of the more aristocratic
mansions; just allowing space for the passers-by to
become visible, before they again disappeared into the
darkness, where it was no uncommon thing for robbers
40 to be in waiting for their prey.

The traditions of those bygone times, even to the
smallest social particular, enable one to understand more
clearly the circumstances which contributed to the
formation of character. The daily life into which people
45 are born, and into which they are absorbed before they
are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred
has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when
the right time comes—when an inward necessity for
independent individual action arises, which is superior to
50 all outward conventionalities. Therefore it is well to know
what were the chains of daily domestic habit which were
the natural leading-strings of our forefathers before they
learnt to go alone.

The picturesqueness of those ancient streets has
55 departed now. The Astleys, the Dunstans, the
Waverhams—names of power in that district—go up
duly to London in the season, and have sold their
residences in the county-town fifty years ago, or more.
And when the county-town lost its attraction for the
60 Astleys, the Dunstans, the Waverhams, how could it be
supposed that the Domvilles, the Bextons, and the Wildes
would continue to go and winter there in their
second-rate houses, and with their increased
expenditure? So the grand old houses stood empty
65 awhile; and then speculators ventured to purchase, and to
turn the deserted mansions into many smaller dwellings,
fitted for professional men, or even (bend your ear lower,
lest the shade of Marmaduke, first Baron Waverham,
hear) into shops!

1. The function of the adjectives “picturesque” (line 7), “quaint” (line 12), and “amusing” (line 17) is primarily to
 - (A) introduce a sense of the town’s fanciful residential design
 - (B) inject comedy into the description of the town
 - (C) discredit the historical relevance of the town
 - (D) define the character of the town’s leading families
 - (E) call the supposed modernity of the town into question

2. The main purpose of the repetition of negative diction in lines 21-27 (“and with . . . friends”) is to emphasize the difference between the
 - (A) crowded streets and the empty houses
 - (B) grand mansions and the small-town setting
 - (C) natural light and the artificial light
 - (D) aristocracy and the middle class
 - (E) welcoming homes and the dangerous streets

3. Which of the following statements best conveys the effect of the sentences in lines 30-34 (“The broad . . . paces”)?
 - (A) The imagery reinforces a sense of the vulnerability of the pedestrians.
 - (B) The candid tone removes blame from the owners of the houses.
 - (C) The exaggerated diction undercuts the danger mentioned in the previous sentence.
 - (D) The parallel structure emphasizes the unity among the townspeople.
 - (E) The adjectives illustrate the benevolence of the wealthy.

4. In relation to the second paragraph (lines 6-40), the third paragraph (lines 41-53) represents a shift from
 - (A) the town’s history to the narrator’s own history
 - (B) a character’s perspective to an omniscient narrator’s perspective
 - (C) a primarily realistic account to a fantastical portrayal
 - (D) an exaggerated satire to a moment of sincere reflection
 - (E) a detailed description to a philosophical commentary

5. The sentence in lines 44-50 (“The daily . . . conventionalities”) reveals that the narrator
 - (A) appreciates tradition
 - (B) deplores the town’s immorality
 - (C) admires self-determination
 - (D) tends to be mired in custom
 - (E) condemns the aristocracy

6. Based on the second and third paragraphs (lines 6-53), which of the following can be reasonably inferred regarding the narrator’s understanding of individual “character” (line 44)?
- (A) The inner lives of individuals develop independently of the political climate they are born into.
 - (B) The environment that individuals live and work in exerts a subtle but powerful influence on their inner lives.
 - (C) Moral virtue depends on rigorous discipline and careful instruction.
 - (D) Not even a rich inner life can compensate for wretched living conditions.
 - (E) It is impossible for individuals to muster sufficient inner strength to overcome political oppression.
7. The metaphor of “chains” (lines 46 and 51) chiefly serves to emphasize the
- (A) power of one’s circumstances
 - (B) pull of one’s moral beliefs
 - (C) limitations of geography
 - (D) bonds of history
 - (E) continuity of time
8. In lines 67-69 the statement in parentheses (“bend . . . hear”) most clearly conveys a sense of
- (A) petty gossip
 - (B) respect for the dead
 - (C) mild distraction
 - (D) awe of powerful men
 - (E) mock fear
9. The narrator’s perspective throughout the passage might best be described as that of
- (A) an enthusiastic investigator
 - (B) a fantastical storyteller
 - (C) a pedantic historian
 - (D) an interested commentator
 - (E) a former resident
10. In relation to the first sentence (lines 1-5), the remainder of the passage serves primarily to
- (A) explain why the assize-town is no longer a popular tourist destination
 - (B) reassure readers that there is nothing disturbing about the history of the assize-town
 - (C) explore the circumstances that account for the assize-town’s great political and social prominence
 - (D) justify the claim that the visitor would be surprised by the history of the assize-town
 - (E) document the living conditions in the assize-town prior to the Tudor era

Questions 11–19 refer to the poem “To be of use,” published in 1999.

A link to the poem “To be of use” is found on the [AP English Literature and Composition Classroom Resources Page](#).

11. The poem as a whole is best understood as a
- (A) eulogy for a lost age of real work
 - (B) plea for work to be less burdensome
 - (C) vindication of the humanity of workers
 - (D) celebration of earnest work and workers
 - (E) defense of unusual types of work and workers
12. In context, “dallying in the shallows” (line 3) most nearly means
- (A) misunderstanding an assignment
 - (B) waiting for worthwhile work
 - (C) lingering over satisfying labor
 - (D) pretending to complete a job
 - (E) hesitating to perform a task

13. In line 5, “that element” refers to both
- (A) water and work
 - (B) love and labor
 - (C) mud and muck
 - (D) skill and strength
 - (E) wind and tides
14. Which best describes the difference in the way the “people” (lines 1 and 8) are characterized in stanza one versus stanza two?
- (A) Rapid movement versus wearied stasis
 - (B) Supple grace versus undisciplined power
 - (C) Eager activity versus plodding exertion
 - (D) Measured patience versus hopeless resignation
 - (E) Innate enthusiasm versus thoughtful neutrality
15. In the poem, the term “parlor generals” (line 15) most probably refers to individuals who
- (A) behave with unrelenting valor on the battlefield
 - (B) view their work obligations as enforced military service
 - (C) have retired from illustrious careers, only to be forgotten
 - (D) have performed deeds because they sought public praise
 - (E) hold forth as experts on work they have never accomplished
16. The word “submerge” (line 12) most clearly echoes which earlier line from the poem?
- (A) Line 2 (“jump . . . first”)
 - (B) Line 6 (“the black . . . seals”)
 - (C) Line 8 (“I love . . . cart”)
 - (D) Line 9 (“who pull . . . patience”)
 - (E) Line 10 (“who strain . . . forward”)
17. One effect of the shift in the speaker’s focus in the third stanza is to
- (A) introduce the idea that dedication to a task is a quality valued by most people
 - (B) imply that people are obligated to help others whenever they can
 - (C) argue that it is better to be a follower than a leader
 - (D) emphasize the value that the speaker puts on the act of collaboration
 - (E) lament the speaker’s own tendency toward thought instead of action

18. In lines 20–21, the speaker suggests which of the following about work?
- (A) It can have aesthetic value.
 - (B) It may bind people together.
 - (C) Its benefits can be elusive.
 - (D) It is rarely well done.
 - (E) It should express the workers' feelings.
19. The speaker mentions “wine or oil” (line 22) and “corn” (line 23) to highlight the
- (A) misguided values of many museums
 - (B) useful commodities supplied by work
 - (C) functional nature of some venerated objects
 - (D) enigmatic purpose of certain historical artifacts
 - (E) artistry implicit in mundane items

Section II: Free-Response

Poetry Analysis (Free-Response Question 1 on the AP Exam)

In the following poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson (published in 1867), the speaker reflects on the process of growing older. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Emerson uses poetic elements and techniques to convey the speaker's complex perspective on aging.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents an interpretation and may establish a line of reasoning.
- Select and use evidence to develop and support your line of reasoning.
- Explain the relationship between the evidence and your thesis.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Terminus¹

It is time to be old,
To take in sail:—
The god of bounds,
Who sets to seas a shore,
5 Came to me in his fatal rounds,
And said: “No more!
No farther shoot
Thy broad ambitious branches, and thy root.
Fancy departs: no more invent;
10 Contract thy firmament
To compass of a tent.
There's not enough for this and that,
Make thy option which of two;
Economize the failing river,
15 Not the less revere the Giver,
Leave the many and hold the few.
Timely wise accept the terms,
Soften the fall with wary foot;
A little while
20 Still plan and smile,
And,—fault of novel germs,—
Mature the unfallen fruit.
Curse, if thou wilt, thy sires,
Bad husbands of their fires,

¹the Roman god of boundaries

25 Who, when they gave thee breath,
Failed to bequeath
The needful sinew stark as once,
The Baresark² marrow to thy bones,
But left a legacy of ebbing veins,
30 Inconstant heat and nerveless reins,—
Amid the Muses, left thee deaf and dumb,
Amid the gladiators,³ halt and numb.”
As the bird trims⁴ her to the gale,
I trim myself to the storm of time,
35 I man the rudder, reef the sail,
Obey the voice at eve obeyed at prime:
“Lowly faithful, banish fear,
Right onward drive unharmed;
The port, well worth the cruise, is near,
40 And every wave is charmed.”

²A Baresark was an ancient Scandinavian warrior who fought without armor, was frenzied in battle, and was thought to be invulnerable.

³In ancient Rome, gladiators fought to the death for the public’s entertainment.

⁴adjusts

Prose Fiction Analysis (Free-Response Question 2 on the AP Exam)

An [excerpt from the novel *Lucy*](#), by Caribbean-American author Jamaica Kincaid, published in 1990, is found on the [AP English Literature and Composition Classroom Resources Page](#). In this passage, the narrator describes the beginning of a new phase in her life. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Kincaid uses literary elements and techniques to portray the complexity of the narrator’s new situation.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents an interpretation and may establish a line of reasoning.
- Select and use evidence to develop and support your line of reasoning.
- Explain the relationship between the evidence and your thesis.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Literary Argument (Free-Response Question 3 on the AP Exam)

In many works of literature, characters who have been away from home return and find that they no longer have the same feelings about home as they once did. As novelist James Agee writes in *A Death In the Family*, "You can go home, it's good to go home, but you never really get all the way home again in your life."

Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which a character's return home is problematic: "home" is not what it once was perceived to be. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the character's response to his or her "home" contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents an interpretation and may establish a line of reasoning.
- Select and use evidence to develop and support your line of reasoning.
- Explain the relationship between the evidence and your thesis.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

- *The Age of Innocence*
- *Americanah*
- *The Bell Jar*
- *The Bonesetter's Daughter*
- *Breath, Eyes, Memory*
- *Brighton Beach Memoirs*
- *Ceremony*
- *Cold Mountain*
- *Death of a Salesman*
- *Exit West*
- *Great Expectations*
- *Gulliver's Travels*
- *Home*
- *Homegoing*
- *The Hummingbird's Daughter*
- *Kindred*
- *The Kite Runner*
- *Lonely Londoners*
- *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*
- *Mansfield Park*
- *The Mill on the Floss*
- *Mrs. Dalloway*
- *My Ántonia*
- *The Namesake*
- *Native Son*
- *Paradise Lost*
- *The Piano Lesson*
- *The Poisonwood Bible*
- *Pudd'nhead Wilson*
- *Pygmalion*
- *Quicksand*
- *The Return of the Native*
- *The Scarlet Letter*
- *Song of Solomon*
- *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*
- *The Sound and the Fury*
- *The Tempest*
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- *Where the Dead Sit Talking*
- *Wuthering Heights*

Answer Key and Question Alignment to Course Framework

Multiple-Choice Question	Answer	Skill	Essential Knowledge
1	A	5.B	FIG-1.M
2	D	5.B	FIG-1.C
3	A	5.D	FIG-1.Q
4	E	3.D	STR-1.J
5	C	4.C	NAR-1.R
6	B	4.C	NAR-1.R
7	A	6.B	FIG-1.K
8	E	4.C	NAR-1.Q
9	D	4.A	NAR-1.B
10	D	3.C	STR-1.F
11	D	7.B	LAN-1.D
12	E	6.B	FIG-1.K
13	A	5.B	FIG-1.B
14	C	4.C	NAR-1.X
15	E	6.B	FIG-1.K
16	A	3.C	STR-1.AC
17	D	3.D	STR-1.J
18	A	5.D	FIG-1.O
19	C	4.C	NAR-1.N

Free-Response Question	Question Type	Skill
1	Poetry Analysis	4.C, 7.A, 7.B, 7.C, 7.D, 7.E
2	Prose Fiction Analysis	1.A, 7.A, 7.B, 7.C, 7.D, 7.E
3	Literary Argument	1.E, 2.C, 7.A, 7.B, 7.C, 7.D, 7.E

The scoring information for the questions within this course and exam description, along with further exam resources, can be found on the [AP English Literature and Composition Exam Page](#) on AP Central.