

AP Literature and Composition Review : RESPONDING TO ESSAY QUESTION

(From the AP Readers' Perspective)

- Those who read and score AP essays are trained to reward students for what they do well, rather than look for the little "missing pieces." They recognize that essays are unrevised, first drafts. They also realize students are under great pressure (for example, a student might mix character names in an otherwise solid essay and not be graded down)
- The essay should demonstrate what a student might do at the end of a college freshman course. Work to develop an idea and to show command of the material. Content is primary. Most AP essay questions ask you to analyze on a two-level system—what did the author do (in terms of main idea, central attitude, or basic emotion evoked from the reader) and how did he/she do it (examining such elements as imagery, figurative language, diction, syntax, structure, style)? Jot notes in test booklet to generate ideas.
- In a 40-minute situation, you should study the problem (identify the focus of the question), read the selection, and start writing within 7 to 10 minutes. (If you are confused about how to start, restate the topic as it is addressed in the question. Discover your thesis at the end—but do this only if you are confused.) Be sure to focus on the question asked; don't rely on some old model which doesn't address the focus.
- A strong opening states the focus of the question by offering a definitive observation which emerges from your own thinking. An acceptable opening only restates the topic; however, the reader can forgive a weak opening.
- Do not open with a generic introduction or with an introduction in which you comment on something "related" to the piece of literature. Get right into the focus of the piece; introduce in just a few sentences
- Readers reward you if the piece picks up after a weak opening. Try to finish strong.
- If you are running short on time, focus on wrapping up your argument— do not leave your essay/ argument unfinished.
- In responding to the prose and poetry selections, consider writing one body paragraph for each major section of the work. Sections are determined by shifts in setting, action, or time. Sometimes it is better not to organize around techniques or devices on which the questions ask you to focus (items like diction, figurative language, etc.). Organize around factors in the piece of literature itself—, show how the speaker's thoughts change and move instead.
- Keeping the paragraphs concise and focused helps to keep ideas clear for both you and the reader.
- Use clear transitions that help the reader to follow the flow of your essay: Keep your paragraphs organized; do not digress.
- Quote words and phrases so they are integrated within your piece. A quote of more than one line from the text is too much.
- In writing about the poetry question, direct your attention to certain elements addressed in the objective question. You should be able to discuss tone, point of view, imagery, figurative language, structure, syntax, who the speaker is, and poem's impact on reader.
- In writing about prose, you are asked to deal with some of the same items as in poetry questions (see the preceding point). Sometimes, contrasting passages are presented. Avoid the trap of just rephrasing or retelling the passage with quotes. Avoid listing, but not explaining. Show your thinking.

- Be thorough and specific. Do not simply "point out!" strategies. Explain how they are used, give examples, and show how they establish attitude. ANALYZE!
- Write to express, not impress: Keep vocabulary and syntax within your zone of competence. Students who inflate their writing often inadvertently entertain but seldom explain.
- Demonstrate that you understand style: Show the reader how the author has developed the selection to create the desired effect. This indicates that you understand the intricacies of the creative process.
- On question 3 (open-ended question), be sure to follow explicit directions. Note whether you are to write about a novel, a play, or either. Never write about a short story for #3.
- In choosing a work of comparable quality for the open-ended question, remember that the better the literature, the better the essay-writing about The Little Engine That Could or some other work of children's literature won't work.
- Remember, you are writing for someone who is familiar with the piece of literature.
- Mechanical difficulties reduce the score only if they hamper communication. However, something VERY badly written can only be scored in the bottom half (no more than 3).
- Be sure to budget your time and write on all three questions. You may write them in any order. Remember that you don't have time to do rough draft and final draft. Instead, use some time to generate material (make notes and "game plan") in the test booklet itself.
- Let your writing shine with ideas and insights: You can receive a 6 or 7 with a lockstep approach, but the essays that earn 8's or 9's expand to a wider perspective.
- The length of your answer is no guarantee of quality.
- Work for good penmanship. If a reader cannot read half the words (especially at 5:30 P.M. on the sixth day of a reading) you will not get a fair reading even if your essay is passed on to a reader with keener eyesight. Patience decreases as the reading progresses.
- Freudian and religious interpretations usually don't "work" well in scoring.
- Don't try to "write around" the question, be cynical and demeaning to the question, or be too clever.
- Don't start to "preach" and offer applications of the passage's idea to the world in general. Offer your analysis.
- Remember: readers see these essays as first-draft efforts. Don't worry about perfection. It's okay to have cross-outs, to add sentences in from the margin, etc. if you have time, reread your essays and do some editing.