



AP English Literature Exam Nuts and Bolts!

The AP Lit Exam is a three-hour exam that contains two sections. First is an hour-long, 55-question multiple choice section, and then a two hour, three question free-response section. The exam tests your ability to analyze works and excerpts of literature and also cogently communicate that analysis in essay form.

Part I. The Multiple Choice Section

The multiple-choice section is 60 minutes long and has 55 questions. You can expect to see 4-5 excerpts of prose and poetry. You will, in general, not be given an author, date, or title for these works, although occasionally the title of a poem is given. Unusual words are also sometimes defined for you.

The date ranges of works could fall from the 16th to the 21st century. Most works will be originally written in English, although you may occasionally see a passage in translation.

There are, generally speaking, eight kinds of questions you can expect to see on the test. Because I am so awesome, I'll break each of them down here and give you tips on how to identify and approach them.

Type #1: Reading Comprehension

These are questions that test your ability to understand what the passage is saying on a pretty basic level. They don't require you to do a lot of interpretation—you just need to know what is actually going on. You can identify these from words and phrases like “according to,” “asserting,” “mentioned,” and so on. Basically, words that point to a fairly concrete register of meaning. You can succeed on these questions by careful reading of the text. You may have to go back and re-read parts to make sure you understand what the passage is saying.

Example:

According to the speaker, the prophet's “words of the weapons” (line 5) will probably not be heeded because

- A. human beings are interested in weapons
- B. nature is more fascinating than warfare
- C. men and women are more concerned with love than with weapons
- D. people have heard such talk too often before
- E. people cannot comprehend abstract descriptions of power

Type #2: Inference

These questions ask you to infer something—a character or narrator's opinion, an author's intention, and so forth—based on what is said in the passage. It will be something that isn't stated directly or concretely, but that you can assume based on what is stated clearly in the passage. You can identify these questions from words like “infer,” and “imply.” The key to these questions is to not be tripped up by the fact that you are making an inference—there will be a best answer, and it will be the choice that is best supported by what is actually found in the passage. In many ways, inference questions are like second-level reading comprehension questions—you need to know not just what a passage says, but what it means.

Example:

From the first sentence, one can infer which of the following about the Dodsons' and Tullivers' religious and moral ideas?

- A. The narrator is unable to describe with complete accuracy.
- B. They have no real logical foundation.
- C. They cannot be appreciated by anyone who does not share them.
- D. They spring from a fundamental lack of tolerance for the ideas of others.
- E. They are not typical of those British Protestants in general.

Type #3: Identifying and Interpreting Figurative Language

These are questions in which you have to either identify what word or phrase is figurative language or provide the meaning of a figurative phrase. You can identify these as they will either explicitly mention figurative language (or a figurative device like simile or metaphor) or will include a figurative language phrase in the question itself. The meaning of figurative language phrases can normally be determined by the phrase's context in the passage—what is said around it? What is the phrase referring to?

Example (identifying):

Which of the following is used figuratively?

- A. “well-cured hams at one’s funeral” (line 27-28)
- B. “the hoarding of coins” (line 36)
- C. “their butter and their frumenty” (line 47)
- D. “the proper bearers at your funeral” (lines 52-53)
- E. “to eat it with bitter herbs” (line 71)

Example (interpreting):

The phrase “that live tongue” (line 27) is best understood as

- A. a metaphor for nature
- B. an image of the poet’s mind
- C. a symbol of the history of the world
- D. a reference to the poem itself
- E. a metaphor for the advice of the prophet

Type #4: Literary Technique

These questions involve identifying why an author does what they do: from using a particular phrase to repeating certain words. Basically, what techniques is the author using to construct the passage/poem and to what effect? You can identify these questions by words like “serves chiefly to,” “effect,” “evoke,” and “in order to.” A good way to approach these questions is to ask yourself, so what? Why did the author use these particular words or this particular structure?

Example:

Which of the following best describe an effect of the repetition of the phrase “ask us” in line 33?

- A. It suggests that the prophet himself is the cause of much of the world’s misery.
- B. It represents a sarcastic challenge to the prophet to ask the right questions.
- C. It suggests that the speaker is certain of the answer the prophet will give.
- D. It makes the line scan as a perfect example of iambic pentameter.
- E. It provides a tone of imploring earnestness.

Type #5: Character Analysis

These questions will ask you to describe something about a character. You can spot them because they will refer directly to characters’ attitudes, opinions, beliefs, or relationships with other characters. This is, in many ways, a special kind of inference question since you are inferring the broader personality of the character based on the evidence in a passage. Also, these pop up much more commonly for prose passages than poetry ones.

Example:

In lines 13-17, (“Their religion...asthma”), the narrator draws attention to the Dodson sisters’

- A. devotion to certain rituals
- B. untroubled complacency
- C. deep religious conviction
- D. disturbed consciences
- E. sense of history and tradition

Type #6: Overall Passage Questions

Some questions will ask you to identify or describe something about the passage/poem as a whole: its purpose, tone, genre, etc. You can identify these by phrases like “in the passage,” and “as a whole.” To answer these questions, you need to think about the excerpt with a bird’s-eye view. What is the overall picture created by all the tiny details?

Example:

In the passage, the narrator is most concerned with

- A. describing the values held by the Dodsons
- B. contrasting different forms of British Protestantism
- C. arguing for the importance of theological values as opposed to practical ones
- D. lamenting the decline of religious values in the lives of people like the Dodsons
- E. questioning the sincerity of the Dodsons

Type #7: Structure

Some questions will ask you about specific structural elements of the passage—a shift in tone, a digression, the specific form of a poem, etc. Often these questions will specify a part of the passage/poem and ask you to identify what that part is accomplishing. Being able to identify and understand the significance of any shifts—structural, tonal, in genre, etc.—will be of key importance for these questions.

Example:

Lines 44-48 can best be described as a

- A. digression from the main subject of the poem
- B. change from description to narration
- C. counterargument to establish the speaker's credibility
- D. metaphorical application of the image of the lute
- E. simile for the relationship between the speaker and Sara

Type #8: Grammar

Very occasionally you will be asked a specific grammar question, such as what word an adjective is modifying. I would also include in this category very specific questions like the meter of a poem (i.e. iambic pentameter). These questions are less about the literary artistry and more about the fairly dry technique involved in having a command of the English language.

Example:

In line 38, "tranquil" functions as which of the following?

- A. an adjective modifying "I" (line 36)
- B. an adverb modifying "behold" (line 36)
- C. an adjective modifying "moonbeams" (line 37)
- D. an adjective modifying "muse" (line 38)
- E. an adverb modifying "muse" (line 38)

That covers the 8 types of multiple choice questions! Keep track of these.

Part II. Free-Response Section

The second part of the exam is two hours long and involves three free-response essay questions—so you'll have roughly 40 minutes per essay. Note, though, that no one will prompt you to move from essay to essay, so you can theoretically divide up the time how you want (but be sure to leave enough time for each essay). The first two essays are literary analysis essays of specific passages, with one poem and one prose excerpt—and the final is an analysis of a given theme in a work selected by you. Each essay is equally weighted, so each one is one-third of your essay score.

Essays One and Two - Literary Passage Analysis

For the first two essays, you'll be presented with an excerpt and directed to analyze the excerpt for a given theme, device, or development. One of the passages will be poetry, and one will be prose. You will usually be provided with the author of the work, the approximate date, and some orienting information (i.e. the plot context of an excerpt from a novel).

Poetry:

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.

Prose:

The following passage is from the novel *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Ann Evans (1819–1880). 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.

Essay Three - Thematic Analysis

For the third and final essay, you'll be asked to discuss a particular theme in a work that you select. You will be provided with a list of notable works that address the given theme below the prompt, but you can also choose to discuss any "work of literary merit." So you DO have the power to choose which work you wish to write an essay about, but the key word here is "literary merit." So no young adult fiction! Stick to safe bets like novels you were taught in school. (I know, I know—lots of 'young adult' fiction works DO have literary merit, and Shakespeare actually began as low culture, and so on and so forth. You may well find academic designations of "literary merit" elitist and problematic, but the time to rage against the literary establishment is not your AP Lit test.)

Here's a sample question:

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. You may choose a work from the list below or another work of literary merit. Do not merely summarize the plot.

As you can see, the list of works provided spans many different time periods and countries: there are ancient Greek plays (Antigone), modern literary works (like Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* or Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*), Shakespeare plays (*The Merchant of Venice*), 19th-century Russian lit (*Crime and Punishment*), and so on.

Now that I know about it, just how is the AP Literature Exam graded??

The multiple-choice section of the exam comprises 45% of your exam score. The three essays comprise the other 55%. Each essay, then, is worth about 18%.

As on other AP exams, your raw score will be converted to a score from 1-5. You don’t have to get every point possible to get a 5 by any means—but the AP English Literature test does have one of the lowest 5 rates of all APs, with only 7.4% of students receiving 5s in 2016 (no pressure at all).

But how do they get raw scores at all?

Multiple-Choice Scoring:

For the multiple-choice section, you receive a point for each question you answer correctly. There is no guessing penalty, so you should answer every question—but guess only after eliminating any answer that you know is wrong to up your chances of choosing the correct one.

Free-Response Scoring:

Scoring for multiple choice is pretty straightforward. However, essay scoring is a little more complicated. Each of your essays will receive a score from 0-9 based on the College Board rubric. You can find question-specific rubrics for all of the released free-response questions for AP English Lit on the College Board website.



Well, there's the nuts and bolts of the AP English Literature Exam ... now all you have to do is ace it!! 😊