The AP Lit Multiple Choice

The multiple-choice section of the AP English Literature and Composition Exam normally contains between fifty and sixty questions on four or five different passages. One passage has at least fifteen questions and may be reused on a future exam. Two of the passages are prose; two are poetry. Though the poems are usually complete works, the prose passages are likely to be taken from longer works such as novels or plays.

The four or five passages represent different periods of British and American literature. It is likely that one is chosen from the sixteenth or the early seventeenth century and one from the Restoration or eighteenth century, unless these periods are represented by passages on the essay section of the exam. The two other sections are from nineteenth-, twentieth-, or twenty-first century writers. The exam as a whole is likely to include some works by female and minority writers.

You may, by extraordinarily good luck, find a passage on the exam that you've studied in your English class, but the odds are heavily against it. The passages chosen for the exam are almost always those that have not found their way into textbooks and anthologies. Though your AP class should study shorter poems of poets like Shakespeare and Donne, and though a sonnet by one or the other may someday appear on the exam, it will not be one of the popular favorites like "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" or "Death, be not proud." The passages are often by writers you are familiar with, but the specific text is not likely to be familiar to you. To be prepared for the multiple-choice section, you must be able to sight-read a reasonably complex poem or passage of prose written in English within the last six centuries. If your studies are limited to a narrow period—the twentieth century, say—you will be at a serious disadvantage on the multiple-choice section of the exam.

The passages chosen for the exam are not easy. They must be complex enough to generate fifteen or so multiple-choice questions that discriminate among the many thousands of students taking the exam. If the passages are too hard or too easy, they don't accurately rank the exam takers.

To answer the multiple-choice questions, you don't need any specific historical or philosophical knowledge. The passages are self-contained and self-explanatory. If a particularly difficult word appears that is crucial to the understanding of the passage, it is explained in a footnote. But the exam expects you to be familiar with the common terms of literary analysis and to have some familiarity with classical mythology and the more popular parts of the Old and New Testaments. Because so much of British and American literature of the earlier periods is religious, it is quite possible that a religious poem by a writer like George Herbert or Edward Taylor or Anne Bradstreet may be on the exam. But the examiners are eager to ensure that no one is given any special advantage, and if a religious text is used, it should be just as accessible to a nonbeliever as to an evangelical and to a modern Muslim or a Jew as to a Christian. The questions will always be on literary, not doctrinal, issues.

Be glad if you have a teacher who insists on spending weeks on seventeenth- or eighteenth-century works when you would rather be talking about a current author. Unless you're comfortable with the unfamiliar vocabulary, syntax, and conventions of the literature written before our time, you'll have trouble with the multiple-choice section of the exam and possibly with two-thirds of the essay section as well.

Though it will be helpful if you practice multiple-choice exams before you take the exam in May, your first task is to learn to analyze a poem and a prose passage. To practice your skills, you'll find the best exams are those published by the Advanced Placement Program of the College Board. The multiple-choice sections of some past AP English Literature and Composition Exams are available and can be ordered. Though several commercially published AP study guides contain sample multiple-choice exams, their questions and choice of texts are often not sufficiently like those on the real exams to make them very useful. (The exams in this book, it goes without saying, are an exception to this rule.)

There is no quick and easy shortcut to master the analysis of literature. If there were, you wouldn't need to spend four years in high-school English classes, and English teachers would be selling real estate or practicing law or be out of a job. The AP English Literature and Composition Exam is testing all that you've learned about reading and writing and analyzing literature in junior and senior high school. But you can develop a systematic, disciplined method for approaching the literary texts you'll be asked to read on the AP exam.

Analyzing Poems

Some students have trouble with sight-reading poetry because they don't know where to start. They see the word "death" in the first line and "tomb" in the third and jump to the conclusion that this poem (which, in fact, is a sentimental lover's pitch to a woman who has turned him down) must be about mortality, and then spend the next ten minutes trying to make the poem fit these gloomy expectations.

To avoid premature conclusions, and to prepare yourself for the kind of questions you will find in the multiple-choice section, try going through each poem asking the following questions in this approximate order.

1. **What is the dramatic situation?**

   That is, who is the speaker (or who are the speakers)? Is the speaker a male or female? Where is he or she? When does this poem take place? What are the circumstances?

   Sometimes you'll be able to answer all the questions. For instance, in Robert Browning's poem "Porphyria's Lover," the speaker is a male psychopath living in a remote cottage, perhaps in Renaissance Italy, who has strangled his mistress and is sitting with her head propped upon his shoulder. Sometimes you'll be able to answer only a few, and sometimes only vaguely: The speaker is unnamed and unplaced and is speaking to an indeterminate audience. No matter. If you think about these questions, you've already begun to understand the poem.

2. **What is the structure of the poem?**

   That is, what are the parts of the poem and how are they related to each other? What gives the poem its coherence? What are the structural divisions of the poem?

   In analyzing the structure, your best aid is the punctuation. Look first for the complete sentences indicated by periods, semicolons, question marks, or exclamation points. Then ask how the poem gets from the first sentence to the second and from the second to the third. Are there repetitions such as parallel syntax or the use of one simile in each sentence? Answer these questions in accordance with the sense of the poem, not by where a line ends or a rhyme falls. Don't assume that all sonnets will break into an 8–6 or a 4–4–4–2 pattern, but be able to recognize these patterns if they are used.

   Think about the logic of the poem. Does it, say, ask questions, and then answer them? Or does the poem develop an argument? Or does it use a series of analogies to prove a point? Understanding the structure isn't just a matter of mechanics. It will help you to understand the meaning of the poem as a whole and to perceive some of the art, the formal skills that the poet has used.

3. **What is the theme of the poem?**

   You should now be able to see the point of the poem. Sometimes a poem simply says "I love you;" sometimes the theme or the meaning is much more complex. If possible, define what the poem says and why. A love poem usually praises the loved one in the hope that the speaker's love will be returned. But many poems have meanings too complex to be reduced to single sentences. When this is true, a good multiple-choice writer won't ask for a single theme or meaning.

4. **Are the grammar and meaning clear?**

   Make sure you understand the meaning of all the words in the poem, especially words you thought you knew but which don't seem to fit in the context of the poem. Also make sure you understand the grammar of the poem. The word order of poetry is often skewed, and in a poem a direct object may come before the subject and the verb. ("His sounding lyre the poet struck" could possibly indicate that a poet was hit by a musical instrument, but as a line of poetry, it probably means the poet played his harp.)

5. **What are the important images and figures of speech?**

   What are the important literal sensory objects, the images, such as a field of poppies or a stench of corruption? What are the similes and metaphors of the poem? In each, exactly what is compared to what? Is there a pattern in the images, such as a series of comparisons all using men compared to wild animals? The most difficult challenge of reading poetry is discriminating between the figurative ("I love a rose"—that is, my love is like a rose, beautiful, sweet, fragile) and the literal ("I love a rose"—that is, roses are my favorite flower). Every exam tests a reader's understanding of figurative language many times in both the multiple-choice and essay sections.

6. **What are the most important single words used in the poem?**

   This is another way of asking about diction. Some of the most significant words in a poem aren't figurative or images but still determine the effect of the poem. A good reader recognizes which words—usually nouns and verbs, adjectives and adverbs—are the keys to the poem.

7. **What is the tone of the poem?**

   Tone is a slippery word, and almost everyone has trouble with it. It's sometimes used to mean the mood or atmosphere of a work, though purists are offended by this definition. Or it can mean a manner of speaking, a tone of voice, as in "The disappointed coach's tone was sardonic." But its most common use as a term of literary analysis is to denote the inferred attitude of an author. When the author's attitude is different from that of the speaker, as is usually the case in ironic works, the tone of voice of the speaker, which may be calm, businesslike, even gracious, may be very different from the satiric tone of the work, which reflects the author's disapproval of the speaker. Because it is often very hard to define tone in one or two words, questions on tone do not appear frequently on multiple-choice exams. Tone is a topic you can't afford to ignore, however, because the essay topic may well ask for a discussion of the tone of a poem or prose passage.

8. **What literary devices does the poem employ?**

   The list of rhetorical devices that a writer may use is enormous. The terms you should worry about are, above all, metaphor, simile, and personification.

9. **What is the prosody of the poem?**

   You can, in fact, get away with knowing very little about the rhyme, meter, and sound effects of poetry, though versification is not difficult once you're used to the vocabulary you need and can hear the difference between an accented and an unaccented syllable. The essay question has not asked about sound in a poem for several years, and the last time a question asked about the "movement of the verse," the answers on that part of the question were too vague to be of much use in the grading. But it is, of course, always possible that such a task may turn up as part of the essay question. Chances are that of the thirteen to fifteen multiple-choice questions asked on each of the two poems, only one question will ask about the meter or the use of rhyme or the sound effects of a line. As a result, you should expect a total of just two of the fifty-five questions to be on metrics.

Answering Multiple-Choice Poetry Questions

Types of Questions

The process of analysis—or whatever your own method may be—should precede your answering of the multiple-choice questions. The question writer has already gone through the same process, and the questions that you find on the exam will be very much like the ones you've just asked yourself.

- Questions on **dramatic situation:**

  Examples:

  Who is speaking?

  Where is she?

  To whom is the poem addressed?

  Who is the speaker in lines 5–8?

  Where does the poem take place?

  At what time of the year does the poem take place?

- Questions on **structure:**

  Examples:

  How are stanzas 1 and 2 related to stanza 3?

  What word in line 20 refers back to an idea used in lines 5, 10, and 15?

  Which of the following divisions of the poem best represents its structure?

- Questions on **theme:**

  Examples:

  Which of the following best sums up the meaning of stanza 2?

  With which of the following is the poem centrally concerned?

  The poet rejects the notion of an indifferent universe because . . .

- Questions on **grammar** and **meaning of words:**

  Examples:

  Which of the following best defines the word "glass" as it is used in line 9?

  To which of the following does the word "which" in line 7 refer?

  The verb "had done" may best be paraphrased as . . .

  When answering questions on grammar or meaning, you must look carefully at the context. In questions of meaning, more often than not, the obvious meaning of a word is not the one used in the poem. If it were, there would be no reason to ask you a question about it. The answers to a question about the meaning of the word "glass," for example, might include the following answer choices:

  A. a transparent material used in windows
  B. a barometer
  C. a mirror
  D. a telescope
  E. a drinking vessel

  Without a context, you would have to call all five answers right. On an exam, a poem with a line like "The glass has fallen since the dawn" might well ask for the meaning of "glass" with these five options, and in that case the logical answer would be B. An examination of the next line of the poem would make the correct choice even clearer.

Similarly, grammar questions may exploit double meanings. The verb form "had broken" looks like a past perfect tense: I had broken the glass before I realized it. But a poem might also say "I had broken my heart unless I had seen her once more" in which case "had broken" is not a past perfect indicative verb, but a subjunctive in a conditional sentence. And this sentence could be paraphrased as "If I had not seen her once more, it would have broken my heart."

- Questions on **images** and **figurative language:**

  You should expect a large number of these questions. Because the poems used on the exam must be complex enough to inspire ten to fifteen good multiple-choice questions, it is rare that a poem that does not rely on complex figurative language is chosen.

  Examples:

  To which of the following does the poet compare his love?

  The images in lines 3 and 8 come from what area of science?

  The figure of the rope used in line 7 is used later in the poem in line . . .

- Questions on **diction:**

  Examples:

  Which of the following words is used to suggest the poet's dislike of winter?

  The poet's use of the word "air" in line 8 is to indicate . . .

  The poet's delight in the garden is suggested by all of the following words *EXCEPT* . . .

- Questions on **tone, literary devices,** and **metrics:**

  Examples:

  The tone of the poem (or stanza) can best be described as . . .

  Which of the following literary techniques is illustrated by the phrase "murmurous hum and buzz of the hive"? (onomatopoeia)

  The meter of the last line in each stanza is . . .

Notice that some questions use a negative: "all of the following . . . EXCEPT" is the most common phrasing. The exam always calls attention to a question of this sort by using capital letters.

Analyzing Prose

Though the analysis of a prose passage is like the analysis of a poem in many ways, there are important differences quite apart from the absence of meter. The prose selections are normally longer than the poems, running from 450 to 850 words. Like the poetry, they represent writing in English in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Some of the prose is more difficult because of differences between style in the earlier periods and that of our time. Some passages are on unfamiliar subjects. Excerpts may come from a variety of both fictional and nonfictional sources: novels, short stories, history, philosophical writing, sermons, journals, letters, essays, biographies, autobiographies, or literary criticism, and the list could go on. You should, however, expect mostly fictional passages on the AP English Literature and Composition Exam; the nonfiction genre is more appropriate for the AP English Language and Composition Exam.

One approach to sight-reading prose is to deal first with the issues of genre (the kind of work, such as novel or essay) and content, then, of structure, and finally, of style.

1. **genre**

   From what kind of a work is the selection taken? Is it fiction or nonfiction?

   Since it is most likely that you will be dealing with a work of fiction, the chances are good that you'll have to think about the character or characters in the passage. The rare work of nonfiction will probably focus on an issue, on an idea, or on the narrator.

2. **narrator**

   You must always be aware of who is speaking and what his or her attitudes are toward the characters or the subject of the passage. If you can, identify who is speaking, where and when, why, and to whom. You will often be unable to answer all of these questions, but answer as many of them as you can.

3. **subject**

   Ascertain what the purpose of the passage is. Is it to present an argument or to introduce a character? To cajole, to entertain, or to stir to action? If you can define an author's purpose clearly, most of the questions on the interpretation of meaning will fall neatly into place.

4. **structure**

   The normal unit of prose is the paragraph, and the passages on the AP Exam run from a single long paragraph (the prose writers of the seventeenth century sometimes wrote paragraphs that seem as long as chapters to modern readers) to ten shorter paragraphs. As with a poem, try to see how each part advances the progress of the whole. Notice how the paragraphs are related to each other and to the passage as a whole.

5. **style**

   The style of prose is determined by diction, imagery, figurative language, and syntax—all matters you deal with in the analysis of poetry. In addition, the analysis of prose is certain to raise questions about the rhetoric of a passage, that is, its use of words to persuade or influence a reader. There is, of course, rhetoric in poetry, but questions about rhetoric are more likely to be asked about prose passages.

Answering Multiple-Choice Prose Questions

Types of Questions

Most of the multiple-choice questions on the prose passage take the following forms:

- Questions on **situation and content:** on the passage as a whole; on a single paragraph; on a single sentence.
  Examples:
  The main subject of the passage is . . .
  The primary distinction made in the first paragraph is between . . .
  According to lines 3–7, which of the following is the chief . . .
  In the third paragraph, the author is chiefly concerned with . . .

- Questions on **meaning of words or phrases:**
  Examples:
  As it is used in line 2, the word x can be best understood to mean . . .
  In line 7, the word x employs all of the following meanings *EXCEPT* . . .
  The phrase xyz is best understood to mean . . .

- Questions on **grammar:**
  Examples:
  In the opening clause, the word "which" refers to . . .
  In line 12, the antecedent of "it" is . . .
  The subject of the long sentence that makes up the third paragraph is . . .

- Questions on **diction:**
  Examples:
  The speaker's choice of verbs in the paragraph is to stress the . . .
  The speaker's anger is suggested by all of the following *EXCEPT* . . .

- Questions on **figurative language:**
  Examples:
  The comparison in lines 1 to 3 compares . . .
  The analogy of the second paragraph compares . . .
  The phrase xyz is best read as a metaphor relating to . . .
  The purpose of the astronomy metaphor in line 9 is to . . .

- Questions on **structure:**
  Examples:
  The transitions from the first to the second and the second to the third paragraph are dependent upon . . .
  The last paragraph of the passage is related to the first chiefly by . . .

- Questions on **literary techniques:**
  Examples:
  In the third paragraph, the description of the cat on roller skates is an example of . . .
  All of the following phrases are paradoxes *EXCEPT* . . .
  The phrase "silent scream" is an example of . . .

- Questions on **rhetoric:**

  Examples:

  The rhetorical purpose of lines 1–6 is to . . .

  The argument of the passage can best be described as progressing from . . .

  Which of the following best describes the function of the last sentence?

  The effect of shifting from the past to the present tense in the third paragraph is . . .

  The happiness of the speaker is conveyed primarily by the use of . . .

- Questions on **tone:**

  Examples:

  The tone of the passage may be described as . . .

  In discussing x in the second paragraph, the speaker adopts a tone of . . .