Sample Student Essays

Following are two actual student essays followed by a rubric and comments on each. Read both of the samples in sequence to clarify the differences between “high” and “mid-range” essays.

Student Essay A

A picture is worth a thousand words, but James Joyce manages to paint a pretty vivid one in only two short paragraphs. Joyce offers tremendous insight into the character of Gabriel in the short story “The Dead.” He captures the essence of a scene laden with death and laced with tones of despair and hopelessness. By employing third person narration alternating with a stream of consciousness, Joyce demonstrates his abilities to delve deep into Gabriel’s mind, illustrating this somewhat detached disposition and low self-image.

The passage takes us through Gabriel’s reflections upon past, present, and future events while his inner character unfolds. Joyce’s careful use of diction suggests that Gabriel has emotionally closed himself off to the world as he tries to cope with some aforementioned incident. He was “hardly pained” to think about a situation which caused a “riot of emotions” just a little earlier on that evening. Here, Joyce is emphasizing Gabriel’s way of coping with an unfavorable event by blocking it out. He continues to “unresentfully” reflect upon what had occurred, closing himself off from any pain he obviously experienced a short while ago.

With the powerful omniscience of a third-person narrator, Joyce is able to describe the workings of Gabriel’s inner consciousness without writing from the first-person point of view. Gabriel further detaches himself as he thinks about his wife. He watches her from the point of view of an outsider, as if they were never married. The mere fact that Gabriel is able to do this suggests that he and his wife do not
have a truly loving relationship. This assertion is underscored by the “friendly” pity Gabriel feels for his wife, emphasizing the lack of true love in their relationship. Gabriel later questions his wife’s honesty, further emphasizing a troubled relationship. The reader may be inclined to infer that Gabriel is completely devoid of compassion; however, this idea is refuted. Gabriel proceeds to express an element of sorrow when he thinks back to his wife’s youth and beauty.

The evening’s events had evidently triggered some type of emotional outburst which Gabriel cannot stop thinking about. His mental state is paralleled by the chaotic state of disorder in the room he is in. With a masterful control of language and syntax, Joyce describes in short, choppy sentences the array of clothing strewn around the room. This is followed by one of the longest sentences in the passage. Joyce reveals this series of events all at once, paralleling Gabriel’s release of a multitude of emotions at once.

Joyce weaves a motif of darkness and death into the story. His aunt’s “haggard” appearance ironically catches Gabriel’s attention during the recitation of Arrayed for the Bridal, a seemingly happy song. This image of happiness and marriage is further contrasted with images of the woman’s funeral and a detailed description of how Gabriel will mourn for her. Joyce also takes time to underscore Gabriel’s low self-esteem, in that he will only think of “lame and useless” words at a time when comforting tones are necessary. He is essentially describing himself, since it has been established that he failed as a husband and that he is emotionally distraught even though he blocks out the pain he feels. “The blinds would be drawn down,” Gabriel says, as he describes both the room at his aunt’s funeral and his mental state of affairs.

The true originator of “stream-of-consciousness” techniques, Joyce delves deep into Gabriel’s mind, describing his wide range of emotions and state of mind. His powerful diction reveals a great deal about Gabriel’s character while his implied insights penetrate into the reader’s mind, reinforcing the abstract meanings behind the actions and events that transpire throughout the course of his story.

**Student Essay B**
In the excerpt from the short story “The Dead” from *Dubliners* by James Joyce, the author describes some personality traits of the character Gabriel as he sits watching a sleeping woman. The point of view from which this excerpt is expressed helps the reader to get to know Gabriel because the narrator is omniscient and knows how Gabriel perceives things and what he is thinking. With the use of many literary devices such as imagery, diction, and syntax, the reader is able to see that Gabriel is an observant and a reflective person, but he is also detached.

Gabriel comes across as observant, because throughout the entire passage he is observing a woman, his wife, sleeping. He scans the room looking over everything and taking note of everything. An example of this is looking at “her tangled hair and half-open mouth, listening to her deep-drawn breath.” The author uses the technique of syntax (“deep-drawn breath” and “half-open mouth”) in the above quotation to show us exactly what Gabriel is seeing. Gabriel notices many details, and they are described so that the reader can clearly formulate a picture of what he is gazing at. This imagery can be seen in lines such as the one where the woman’s boots are being described. “One boot stood upright, its limp upper fallen down: the fellow of it lay upon the side.” The diction used such as “limp” and “upright,” are concrete words that create clear pictures. Another reason that Gabriel comes across as observant is because he catches and notices little things. For example, he “caught” the “haggard look” on his Aunt Julia’s face.

Resulting from the fact that Gabriel is observant, he is also reflective. He thinks over past events that had happened and wonders what caused them and why he did what he did. In the first paragraph he reflects on his wife’s “fading beauty,” what she used to look like, and the story of the death of Michael Furey. He realizes that it is a possibility that she had not told him the entire story concerning the boy’s death. He further reflects when he is thinking about his emotional outburst. He asks himself many questions including “From what had it proceeded?”

A feeling of detachment is also present. The way he looks at his wife “as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife” shows that he is viewing his own life from an objective standpoint. He is able to look at his own life as though it wasn’t his. The sentence that reads “it hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life,” further exemplifies this feeling of detachment. Feelings that he used to feel no longer even touched him. He was able to recognize them, yet remain separate. In the second paragraph Gabriel continues
to come across as remote. He is able to picture and describe in great detail the death and funeral of his Aunt Julia. He narrates the future drastic event in a matter-of-fact way. Gabriel goes so far as to describe what he will be thinking at the time of his Aunt Julia’s death which is “he would cast about in his mind for some words that might console her (his Aunt Kate), and would find only lame and useless ones.” This statement finalizes the idea that Gabriel is a person who is, at least to some degree, detached from his own life.

Even though the passage is fairly short, the author is able to impart a fair amount of information concerning the character Gabriel. It becomes apparent that he possesses the qualities of observance, reflection, and detachment. These qualities are all interconnected because of the fact that he is observant leading to his ability to reflect on his actions and actions of others. This in turn leads to his detachment, because when he reflects on his life he does it from the standpoint of a third-person narrator. The author’s use of literary techniques helps to convey these personality traits of Gabriel to a reader.

Let’s take a look at a set of rubrics for this prose passage essay. (If you want to see actual AP rubrics as used in a recent AP Lit exam, log on to the College Board website: <www.collegeboard.org/ap>.) As you probably know, essays are rated on a 9–1 scale, with 9 the highest and 1 the lowest. Since we are not with you to personally rate your essay and to respond to your style and approach, we will, instead, list the criteria for high-, middle-, and low-range papers. These criteria are based on our experience with rubrics and reading AP Literature exam essays.

A high-range essay can be a 9 or an 8. Middle refers to essays in the 7, 6, 5 range. And the low-scoring essays are rated 4, 3, 2, 1.

After reading the following rubrics, evaluate the two essays that you have just read.

Note: Let’s be honest with each other. We all can recognize a 9 essay. It sings, and we wish we had written it. It’s wonderful that the essays don’t all have to sing the same song with the same words and rhythm. Conversely, we can, unfortunately, recognize the 1 or 2 paper, which is off key, and we are relieved not to have written one like it.

Rating the Student Essays