The Prose Passage Essay

IN THIS CHAPTER

Summary: Complete explanation of the prose passage essay and its purpose as it is presented on the AP English Literature exam

Key Ideas

- Learn the types of prose passage prompts you might encounter on the AP English Literature exam
- Learn about the rubrics and rating of the AP English Literature prose passage essay
- Learn the basics of reading and notating a given passage
- Learn the basics of constructing your response to the prompt
- Examine the student models that respond to the diagnostic exam’s prose passage essay prompt
- Learn how the rubrics were used to rate the student sample essays

Introduction to the Prose Passage Essay

This section of the exam gives you an opportunity to read and analyze a prose piece of literature. This is your chance to become personally involved in the text and to demonstrate your literary skills.

What is an AP Literature prose passage?

Generally, it is a one-page excerpt from a work of fiction. More often than not, the selection will be from a novel or short story. The nonfiction selection may include essays, biographies, autobiographies, and articles from periodicals. Be aware that the exam may also present an excerpt from a drama.
What is the purpose in writing an essay about a prose piece?

First, the people at the College Board want to determine your facility in reading and interpreting a sustained piece of literature. It requires you to understand the text and to analyze those techniques and devices the author uses to achieve his or her purpose.

Second, the AP exam is designed to allow you to demonstrate your ease and fluency with terminology, interpretation, and criticism. Also, the level of your writing should be a direct reflection of your critical thinking.

Third, the AP exam determines your ability to make connections between analysis and interpretation. For example, when you find a metaphor, you should identify and connect it to the author’s intended purpose or meaning. You should not just list items as you locate them. You must connect them to your interpretation.

Before beginning to work with an actual prose passage, read the review of processes and terms in the Comprehensive Review section of this book. You should also have completed some of the activities in that section.

Types of Prose Passage Essay Questions

Let’s look at a few prose passage questions that have been asked on the AP Literature exam in the past:

• Analyze narrative and literary techniques and other resources of language used for characterization.
• How does a narrator reveal character? (i.e., tone, diction, syntax, point of view)
• How does the author reveal a character’s predicament? (i.e., diction, imagery, point of view)
• Explain the effect of the passage on the reader.
• Compare/contrast two passages concerning diction and details for the effect on the reader.
• How does the passage provide characterization and evaluation of one character over another? (i.e., diction, syntax, imagery, tone)
• What is the attitude of the speaker toward a particular subject?
• Analyze the effect of revision when given both the original and the revised version of a text.
• Analyze style and tone and how they are used to explore the author’s attitudes toward his or her subject.
• How is the reader prepared for the conclusion of the piece?

You should be prepared to write an essay based on any of these prompts. Practice. Practice. Practice anticipating questions. Keep a running list of the kinds of questions your teacher asks.

Don’t be thrown by the complexity of a passage. Remember, you choose the references you wish to incorporate into your essay. So, even if you haven’t understood everything, you are still able to write an intelligent essay—as long as you address the prompt and refer to the parts of the passage you do understand.

Watch out for overconfidence when you see what you believe to be an easy question with an easy passage. You are going to have to work extra hard to find the nuances in the text that will allow you to write a mature essay.

Rating the Prose Passage Essay

You will be relieved to know that the rating of your essay is not based on whether or not the reader likes you or agrees with your point of view.

How do the test readers evaluate my essay?

It’s important to understand just what it is that goes into rating your essay. This
is called a *rubric*, but don’t let that word frighten you. A rubric is a word that simply refers to the *rating standards that are set and used by the people who read the essays*. These standards are fairly consistent, no matter what the prompt might be. The primary change is in the citing of the specifics in a particular prompt.

Let us assure you that, as experienced readers of the AP English exams, we know that the readers are trained to reward those things you do well in addressing the question. They are *not* looking to punish you. They are aware of the time constraints, and they read your essay just as your own instructor would read the first draft of an essay you wrote on a 40-minute exam. These readers look forward to an interesting, insightful, and well-constructed essay.

So, let’s take a look at the following rubrics:

- **A 9 essay** has all the qualities of an 8 essay, *and* the writing style is especially impressive, as is the analysis and/or discussion of the specifics related to the prompt and the text.
- **An 8 essay** will effectively and cohesively address the prompt. It will analyze and/or discuss the stylistic elements called for in the question. And it will do so using appropriate evidence from the given text. The essay will also show the writer’s ability to control language well.
- **A 7 essay** has all the properties of a 6, only with a more complete and well-developed analysis/discussion or a more mature writing style.
- **A 6 essay** adequately addresses the prompt. The analysis and/or discussion is on target and makes use of appropriate specifics from the text. However, these elements are less fully developed than scores in the 7, 8, and 9 range. The essay writer’s ideas are expressed with clarity, but the writing may have a few errors in syntax and/or diction.
- **A 5 essay** demonstrates that the writer understands the prompt. The analysis/discussion is generally understandable, but the analysis/discussion is limited or uneven. The writer’s ideas are expressed clearly with a few errors in syntax or diction.
- **A 4 essay** is *not an adequate response* to the prompt. The writer’s
analysis/discussion of the text indicates a misunderstanding, an oversimplification, or a misrepresentation of the given passage. The writer may use evidence that is not appropriate or not sufficient to support the analysis/discussion.

- **A 3 essay** is a lower 4 because it is *even less effective* in addressing the prompt. It is also less mature in its syntax and organization.

- **A 2 essay** indicates *little success in speaking to the prompt*. The writer may misread the question, only summarize the passage, never develop the required analysis/discussion, or simply ignore the prompt and write about another topic altogether. The writing may also lack organization and control of language and syntax. (*Note:* No matter how good a summary may be, it will never rate more than a 2.)

- **A 1 essay** is a lower 2 because it is *even more simplistic, disorganized, and lacking in control of language*.

Remember, the essay is really a first draft. The test readers know this and approach each essay with this in mind.

### Timing the Essay

Timing is crucial. With that in mind, here’s a workable strategy:

- 1–3 minutes reading and “working the prompt.”

- 5 minutes reading and making marginal notes about the passage. Try to isolate 2 quotations that strike you. This may give you your opening and closing.

- 10 minutes preparing to write. (Choose one or two of the following methods that you feel comfortable with.)
  - Underlining, bracketing, circling
Using a highlighter is not allowed during the exam. However, it is a strong tool for practice in critical reading.

Note: Throughout this book, the term highlight will also refer to underlining, circling, or bracketing.

In the margin, note what time you should be finished with each essay. For example, the test starts at 1 P.M. You write 1:40 in the margin. Time to move on.

Working the Prompt

You can’t write clearly unless you know Why you are writing and What’s Expected of you. When you “Work the Prompt,” you are maximizing both of these areas.

How should I go about reading the prose prompt?

To bring the answer home to you, we will deconstruct a prompt for you now. (This is the same question that is in the Diagnostic/Master exam.) Plan to spend 1–3 minutes carefully reading the question. This will give you time to really digest what the question is asking you to do.

Here’s the prompt:

In the following passage from the short story “The Dead,” James Joyce presents an insight into the character of Gabriel. Write a well-organized essay in which you discuss various aspects of Gabriel’s character that Joyce reveals to the reader and to Gabriel himself. Refer to such techniques and
devices as imagery, point of view, motif, diction, and syntax.

Here are three reasons why you should do a 1–3-minute careful analysis of the prompt.

1. Once you know what is expected, you will read in a more directed manner.
2. Once you internalize the question, you will be sensitive to those details that will apply.
3. Once you know all the facets that need to be addressed, you will be able to write a complete essay demonstrating adherence to the topic.

Do this now. Underline, circle, or bracket the essential terms and elements in the prompt. Time yourself. How long did it take you? Don’t worry if it took you longer than 1–3 minutes in this first attempt. You will be practicing this technique throughout this review, and it will become almost second nature to you.

Compare our working of the prompt with yours.

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In this prompt, anything else you may have highlighted is extraneous.
When the question uses the expression “such as,” you are not required to use only those ideas presented; you are free to use your own selection of techniques and devices. Notice that the prompt requires more than one technique. One will not be enough. You must use more than one. If you fail to use more than one technique, no matter how well you present your answer, your essay will be incomplete.

Reading and Notating the Prose Passage

Depending on your style and comfort level, choose one of these approaches to your reading:

1. A. Read quickly to get the gist of the passage.
   B. Reread, using the visual and marginal notes approach.
2. A. Read slowly, using highlighting and making marginal notes.
   B. Reread to confirm that you understand the full impact of the passage.

Note: In both approaches, you must highlight and make marginal notes. There is no way to avoid this. Ignore what you don’t immediately understand. It may become clear to you after you finish reading the passage. Practice. Practice. Concentrate on those parts of the passage that apply to what you highlighted in the prompt.

There are many ways to read and interpret any given passage. You have to choose which one to use and which specifics to include for support. Don’t be rattled if there is leftover material.

We’ve reproduced the passage for you below so that you can practice both the reading and the process of deconstructing the text. Use highlighting, arrows, circles, underlining, notes, numbers, and whatever you need to make the