

Teaching to the Test: Preparing Students to Write AP Exam Essays



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The Exam Structure

Part I

Multiple Choice (55-60 questions in one hour; 45% of score)
[usually four passages but sometimes five]

- Prose (12-15 questions) 15 minutes
- Poem (12-15 questions) 15 minutes
- Prose (12-15 questions) 15 minutes
- Poem (12-15 questions) 15 minutes

Part II

Essay (3 free response questions in two hours; 55% of score)

- **Poetry 40 minutes**
- **Prose 40 minutes**
- **Open 40 minutes**

Essay Scores



9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1

upper half

thin in terms of evidence

lower half

9-8 Students are writers!

7-6 Students write well.

- *A poorly written essay must be given a score no higher than a 3.*
- *A stylistically well-written paper may be rewarded with an extra point.*
- *Essays are scored holistically, and **writers are rewarded for what they do well.***



2004 Exam Scoring Worksheet

Section I: Multiple-Choice

number correct 39 - $\frac{1}{4}$ x number wrong 16 = multiple-choice score 35

Section II: Free-Response

question 1 5 + question 2 5 + question 3 5 = free-response score 15

Composite Score:

1.2272 x m-c score 42.95 + 3.0556 x f-r score 45.83 = composite score 87
(Do not round.) (Do not round.)

AP Grade Conversion:

Composite Score	108-150	→ AP Grade 5	(extremely well qualified)
Composite Score	91-107	→ AP Grade 4	(well qualified)
Composite Score	70-90	→ AP Grade 3	(qualified)
Composite Score	42-69	→ AP Grade 2	(possibly qualified)
Composite Score	0-41	→ AP Grade 1	(no recommendation)



2004 Exam Scoring Worksheet

Section I: Multiple-Choice

number correct 39 - $\frac{1}{4}$ x number wrong 16 = multiple-choice score 35

Section II: Free-Response

question 1 6 + question 2 6 + question 3 6 = free-response score 18

Composite Score:

1.2272 x m-c score 42.95 + 3.0556 x f-r score 55.0 = composite score 97
(Do not round.) (Do not round.)

AP Grade Conversion:

Composite Score	108-150	→ AP Grade 5	(extremely well qualified)
Composite Score	91-107	→ AP Grade 4	(well qualified)
Composite Score	70-90	→ AP Grade 3	(qualified)
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Tackling the free-response questions on the AP Exam



Practice:

- Mark the prompt for question 1 from the 2008 AP exam and examine the poems. On what poetic techniques might you choose to focus in an essay?
- In pairs, read and score sample essays.



Teach students how to write a theme statement.

Step one:

You must first decide on the topic of the literary work. Choose an abstract concept like *unrequited love*, *freedom*, *abuse*, *jealousy*, *self-pity*, or *fear of the dark* that the work explores. Then, finish this sentence:

The _____ by _____
(genre) (title) (author)

is about _____.
(topic/abstract concept)



Teach students how To write a theme statement.

Step two:

Now, you need to state what the literary work expresses about the topic. If a poem is about *jealousy*, what idea does it express about that concept? Finish by inserting a clause to complete the following statement:

The _____ by _____
(genre) (title) (author)

is about _____ and reveals that
(topic/abstract concept)

(opinion statement about topic)



Practice:

- Examine the prompt and analyze the passage of question 2 from the 2007 AP exam and compose a theme statement.
- In pairs, read and score sample essays.



Provide a variety of opportunities for students to hone time-management skills.

- Marking prompt and passage (10 min.)
- Writing theme statements for prompt passages (5 min.)
- Creating outline for timed essay (15 min.)
- Collaborating as a group to compose outline (25 min.)
- Working as a team to write theme statements (10 min.)
- Using *MabLibs* to create theme statements (5 min.)
- Composing essays in response to exam prompts (40 min.)



Preparing students for the free-response open question (which should be their highest score)

- Read and study a variety of literary works (*13 per academic year*)
- Write timed essays in response to actual AP prompts for each work.
- Create an environment of sharing. (*group scoring and analysis*)
- Allow students choice in reviewing for AP examination.
- Instruct students to cover the suggested works and generate their own list.



Other suggestions for free-response success

- Require students to examine poetry, prose, and open prompts regularly.
- Note patterns in prompts. (*i.e. paired poems focusing on tone, prose prompts focusing on characterization*)
- Coach students to grade essays with scoring guide.
- Include revision and self-assessment throughout the year.
- Allow students to master prompt analysis by writing their own.
- Teach students to pay attention to footnotes.