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AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

The AP Lit Exam Explained

A complete description of the AP English Literature and Composition exam: format, timing, what each section tests, how it is scored, what the score distributions look like, and what to expect on test day. Read this before your first practice exam and return to it whenever a detail is unclear.

The exam in one table

SECTION	WHAT YOU DO	ITEMS	TIME	WEIGHT
I — Multiple Choice	Read 5 passages (prose fiction, drama, poetry) and answer questions on each	55 questions, 4 choices each	60 minutes	45%
II — Free Response	Write 3 essays: Poetry Analysis, Prose Fiction Analysis, Literary Argument	3 essays, each scored 0–6	120 minutes (40 suggested per essay)	55%

Total testing time is 3 hours, with a short break between sections. The exam is given in the Bluebook app on a computer or tablet. You type your essays, and they submit automatically when time runs out.

Section I: Multiple Choice in detail

Passages

You get five passages. The CED requires at least two prose fiction passages (drama counts as prose fiction) and at least two poetry passages; the fifth can be either. The typical exam is two poems and three prose or drama excerpts. Each passage is followed by 8 to 13 questions, for a total of 55.

Passages generally span the sixteenth through twenty-first centuries and are mostly works originally written in English, though translated passages occasionally appear. The author, title, and date are usually withheld for prose; poems sometimes carry a title. Footnotes gloss archaic or unfamiliar words. Line numbers appear in the margin so questions can point to specific lines.

Historically, poetry passages lean on sixteenth- to nineteenth-century British verse (Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Browning, Tennyson, Hardy, Rossetti, Dickinson) alongside twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets (Frost, Bishop, Plath, Heaney, Walcott, Rita Dove, Li-Young Lee, Natasha Trethewey). Sonnets are especially common because the volta makes “shift” questions natural. Prose passages range from Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy, Hawthorne, Melville, and James through Joyce, Woolf, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Ellison, Baldwin, Morrison, Erdrich, and Lahiri. Recent exams deliberately include more twentieth- and twenty-first-century and global authors. Drama excerpts (Shakespeare, Wilde, Ibsen, Chekhov, Williams, Miller, Hansberry, Wilson) appear on most but not all exams.

Answer choices: four, not five

Beginning with the May 2025 exam, every multiple-choice question has **four** answer choices (A–D). Every released exam and most prep books written before 2025 use five choices. The practice exams in this folder use four. When you practice with older released material, simply note that the extra wrong answer makes those sets slightly harder than the real thing.

There is no penalty for guessing. Answer every question.

What the questions test: the seven skill categories

Every multiple-choice question is tagged to one of seven skill categories from the CED. The exam weights them as follows.

SKILL CATEGORY	SHARE OF MCQS	ABOUT HOW MANY OF 55
1. Explain the function of character	16–20%	9–11
2. Explain the function of setting	3–6%	2–3
3. Explain the function of plot and structure	16–20%	9–11
4. Explain the function of the narrator or speaker	21–26%	12–14
5. Explain the function of word choice, imagery, and symbols	10–13%	6–7
6. Explain the function of comparison	10–13%	6–7
7. Develop textually substantiated arguments	10–13%	6–7

Two things stand out. First, **narrator and speaker questions are the single largest category**: who is speaking, from what distance, with what attitude, how reliably. Second, **Skill Category 7 questions look different from everything else**. They present a student-written claim, thesis, or paragraph about the passage and ask which evidence best supports it, which sentence works best as a thesis, or which interpretation is most defensible. These “literary argumentation” items are unique to the redesigned exam, and there are about six or seven of them. Expect them.

Typical question stems

You will recognize these patterns quickly once you have seen a few.

- **Character:** "The speaker's attitude toward X is best described as..."; "The contrast between X and Y serves primarily to..."
- **Setting:** "The description of the room in lines 1–6 primarily serves to..."
- **Structure:** "The shift in line 9 signals..."; "The final stanza differs from the preceding stanzas in that it..."; "Lines 12–15 serve primarily to..."
- **Narrator/speaker:** "The point of view of the passage is best described as..."; "The narrator's tone in the second paragraph can best be described as..."; "The narrator's reliability is called into question by..."
- **Word choice, imagery, symbol:** "In context, 'X' (line 14) most nearly means..."; "The repetition of 'X' emphasizes..."; "In line 31, 'it' refers to..."
- **Comparison:** "The simile in line 8 compares X to Y in order to emphasize..."; "The allusion to X (line 17) serves to..."
- **Argumentation:** "A student is writing an essay arguing that X. Which of the following lines would best support this claim?"; "Which of the following claims about the passage is most defensible?"
- **Whole passage:** "The passage as a whole is best described as..."; "The tone of the poem is best described as..."

NOT/LEAST/EXCEPT items are rarer than they used to be but still appear. Read stems carefully.

How wrong answers are built

Knowing how distractors work is half of multiple-choice skill. The most common patterns:

1. **Plausible literary generalization the passage never makes.**
2. **True in the real world, but not supported by the cited lines.**
3. **Overreach:** a leap past the evidence (from "particular" to "intolerant").
4. **Half right:** a correct first clause attached to a wrong second clause. Half wrong is all wrong.
5. **Wrong agent:** attributes a feeling or action to the wrong character.
6. **Tone mismatch or tone too extreme:** "contemptuous" when the text supports "skeptical."
7. **Opposites pair:** two choices are antonyms; one is often the key.
8. **Synonymous pair:** two choices mean the same thing; both are wrong.
9. **Literal reading of a figurative phrase** (or the reverse).
10. **Right idea, wrong lines.**
11. **Device named correctly, function stated wrongly.**

The correct answer is the *best supported* answer. It tends to use measured language, stays anchored in specific text, and avoids absolutes. When two choices remain, pick the one you can point to in the passage.

Section II: Free Response in detail

You have 120 minutes for three essays. The clock runs for the whole section; 40 minutes each is a suggestion. You may write the essays in any order.

Question 1: Poetry Analysis

A poem or excerpt of roughly 100–300 words, with title, author, and publication date. The prompt follows a stable pattern: “In the following poem by [author], published in [year], the speaker [situation]. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [author] uses literary elements and techniques to convey/portray/develop [the speaker’s complex ____].”

Every post-2019 poetry prompt has used the word “complex.” Your job is to say what that complexity is.

Question 2: Prose Fiction Analysis

An excerpt of roughly 500–700 words from a novel, short story, or (rarely) play, with author, title, and date and a one- or two-sentence setup. The prompt: “The following excerpt is from [work] by [author], published in [year]. In this passage, [situation]. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [author] uses literary elements and techniques to convey/portray/develop [the complex ____].”

Q2 is consistently the lowest-scoring essay (mean 3.28 in 2024, 3.22 in 2025). The Chief Reader Reports say why: students fixate on the main character and overlook secondary characters, irony, and the narrator’s stance.

Question 3: Literary Argument

A short conceptual lead (“Many works of literature feature characters who...”) followed by: “Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which [concept]. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [concept] contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.” A list of about 38–43 suggested works follows, but you may choose any work of fiction of literary merit, including drama.

Q3 usually has the highest mean (3.50 in 2025) but is also where strong students lose points by summarizing or choosing a half-remembered book.

The four standard bullets

Every prompt ends with the same instructions, which are also the rubric in miniature:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
- Select and use evidence to support your line of reasoning. (Q3 says “Provide evidence.”)
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

How essays are scored: the 6-point analytic rubric

All three essays use the same architecture.

ROW	POINTS	WHAT IT MEASURES
A — Thesis	0–1	A defensible interpretation that responds to the prompt

ROW	POINTS	WHAT IT MEASURES
B — Evidence and Commentary	0–4	Specific evidence plus commentary that builds a line of reasoning; for Q1 and Q2, explanation of how literary elements and techniques create meaning
C — Sophistication	0–1	Sophistication of thought and/or a complex literary argument

The full row text, decision rules, and worked examples are in *The 6-Point Rubrics Decoded* in this folder.

Essays were scored on a 9-point holistic scale before 2019–20. If you see “a 7 essay” or “a 9 essay” in older materials, that is the old scale.

The course framework: Big Ideas, skills, and units

The exam tests the skills in the CED. Understanding the framework tells you what the questions are really asking.

Six Big Ideas

BIG IDEA	CODE	ENDURING UNDERSTANDING (PARAPHRASED)
Character	CHR	Characters let readers explore values, beliefs, assumptions, biases, and cultural norms
Setting	SET	Setting depicts time and place and also conveys the values associated with them
Structure	STR	How parts are arranged, related, and sequenced shapes interpretation
Narration	NAR	A narrator’s or speaker’s perspective controls the details and emphasizes that shape how readers experience a text
Figurative Language	FIG	Comparisons, representations, and associations shift meaning from literal to figurative and invite interpretation
Literary Argumentation	LAN	Readers establish and communicate interpretations through arguments supported by textual evidence

The skills, by category

1. Character (CHR) - 1.A What textual details reveal about a character, their perspective, and their motives - 1.B The function of a character changing or remaining unchanged - 1.C The function of contrasting characters - 1.D How details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships - 1.E How a character's choices, actions, and speech reveal complexities, and the function of those complexities

2. Setting (SET) - 2.A Textual details that convey or reveal a setting - 2.B The function of setting in a narrative - 2.C The relationship between a character and a setting

3. Plot and Structure (STR) - 3.A How plot orders events - 3.B The function of a particular sequence of events - 3.C The function of structure in a text - 3.D The function of contrasts within a text - 3.E The function of a significant event or set of events - 3.F The function of conflict

4. Narrator or Speaker (NAR) - 4.A Identify and describe the narrator or speaker - 4.B The function of point of view - 4.C Details, diction, or syntax that reveal a narrator's or speaker's perspective - 4.D How a narrator's reliability affects a narrative

5. Word Choice, Imagery, and Symbols (FIG) - 5.A Literal versus figurative meanings - 5.B The function of specific words and phrases - 5.C The function of a symbol - 5.D The function of an image or imagery

6. Comparison (FIG) - 6.A Simile - 6.B Metaphor - 6.C Personification - 6.D Allusion

7. Literary Argumentation (LAN) - 7.A A paragraph with a claim requiring defense and the evidence for it - 7.B A thesis conveying a defensible claim that may establish a line of reasoning - 7.C Commentary that explains relationships among evidence, line of reasoning, and thesis - 7.D Relevant and sufficient evidence to develop and support a line of reasoning - 7.E Control over the elements of composition

Notice the verb that governs almost every skill: **explain the function of**. The exam does not reward you for spotting a metaphor. It rewards you for explaining what the metaphor does.

The nine units

The course cycles three genres three times, spiraling the same skills at increasing complexity.

UNIT	TITLE	BIG IDEAS EMPHASIZED
1	Short Fiction I	Character, Setting, Structure, Narration, Argumentation
2	Poetry I	Character, Structure, Figurative Language, Argumentation
3	Longer Fiction or Drama I	Character, Setting, Structure, Argumentation
4	Short Fiction II	Character, Setting, Structure, Narration, Argumentation
5	Poetry II	Structure, Figurative Language, Argumentation
6	Longer Fiction or Drama II	Character, Structure, Narration, Figurative Language, Argumentation

UNIT	TITLE	BIG IDEAS EMPHASIZED
7	Short Fiction III	All six
8	Poetry III	Structure, Figurative Language, Argumentation
9	Longer Fiction or Drama III	Character, Structure, Narration, Argumentation

The multiple-choice section is weighted by unit group: Short Fiction units 42–49%, Poetry units 36–45%, Longer Fiction or Drama units 15–18%. The practical meaning is that poetry is a large share of Section I; students who skip poetry practice give away points.

Unit-level progressions worth knowing: Poetry I introduces stanzas, line breaks, shifts, connotation, simile, and metaphor; Poetry II adds imagery, personification, allusion, extended metaphor, and closed versus open form; Poetry III adds symbol, conceit, ambiguity, and how sonnets and juxtaposition create tension. The fiction units move from basic characterization and point of view through narrative distance, irony, unreliable narration, and foils, to complexity of character and sustaining a full literary argument.

Scoring: from raw points to a 1–5

What College Board publishes and what it does not

College Board publishes the rubrics, the score distributions, and (for FRQs) the mean scores per question in the Chief Reader Reports. It does **not** publish the formula for combining sections into a composite or the cutoffs for each AP score, and those cutoffs shift slightly each year.

The reconstructed composite

Public score calculators (Albert.io, Cognito, College Transitions) use a reconstruction that works like this:

- Multiple choice: 55 raw points $\times$ about 1.2273 $\approx$ 67.5 composite points (45% of 150).
- Free response: each essay 0–6 $\times$ about 4.5833 $\approx$ 27.5 points, for 82.5 total (55% of 150).
- Composite total $\approx$ 150.

Approximate bands

AP SCORE	APPROXIMATE SHARE OF COMPOSITE	ROUGH RAW TARGETS
5	about 70% and up ($\approx 105+/150$)	38–45 MC correct plus essays averaging 5/6, with at least one sophistication point
4	about 58–69%	30–38 MC plus essays around 4/6
3	about 43–57%	22–30 MC plus essays around 3/6
2	about 30–42%	—
1	below about 30%	—

These are reconstructions, not official figures. Use them for direction. A worked calculator is in *Score Calculator and Goal-Setting Worksheet*.

Score distributions

YEAR	5	4	3	2	1	3 OR HIGHER
2021	5.0%	12.0%	27.0%	39.0%	17.0%	44%
2022	16.6%	27.2%	34.0%	14.3%	7.9%	about 78%
2023	15.0%	28.0%	34.0%	14.0%	9.0%	about 77%
2024	13.7%	26.9%	31.8%	16.5%	11.1%	about 72%
2025	16.2%	26.9%	31.0%	15.9%	10.0%	about 74%

In 2024, 389,272 students took the exam with a global mean of 3.16; in 2025, 417,589 students with a mean of 3.46. The 2021 numbers reflect the pandemic cohort; 2022 saw a large upward adjustment after a standard-setting review, and the distribution has been fairly stable since. Sources: Chief Reader Reports 2024 and 2025; Total Registration tables.

FRQ means tell you where points are lost

From the 2025 Chief Reader Report: Row A (thesis) means hover around 0.9, so nearly everyone earns it. Row B means were 2.49 on Q1 and 2.29 on Q2, meaning the typical essay earns a 2 out of 4 for evidence and commentary. Row C (sophistication) means were 0.04–0.07, meaning fewer than one essay in fourteen earns it. The clear conclusion: **the points you can most realistically gain are in Row B**, moving from a 2 to a 3 or 4 on each essay. That is worth roughly 4.5 composite points per essay per rubric point, far more than any single multiple-choice question.

What a 3, a 4, and a 5 look like

These profiles are built from the reconstructed bands and the national means. Real students vary, but the shapes are reliable.

A 3

- Multiple choice: 22–30 correct out of 55 (40–55%). Usually finishes four passages comfortably and rushes the fifth. Misses most Skill 7 “student claim” items and many tone questions.
- Essays: 3/6 average. Earns the thesis point with a general claim. Row B at 2: some specific quotations, commentary that paraphrases or says the evidence “shows” the thesis, paragraphs organized device by device. No sophistication point.
- Typical sentence: “The author uses imagery to show the speaker’s sadness, like when she says ‘the gray fields.’”

A 4

- Multiple choice: 30–38 correct (55–70%). Finishes all five passages. Reliable on line-reference questions; still loses whole-passage tone and structure questions and some argumentation items.

- Essays: 4/6 average. Thesis identifies a specific complexity. Row B at 3: uniformly specific evidence, commentary that explains how language works for *some* evidence, at least one technique explained in terms of meaning, paragraphs that build a line of reasoning even if some evidence is left unintegrated. Occasionally earns a sophistication point on one essay.
- Typical sentence: "The shift from the harsh consonants of 'gray fields' to the open vowels of 'open road' enacts the speaker's loosening grip on grief, suggesting that leaving is both loss and relief."

A 5

- Multiple choice: 38–45 or more correct (70%+). Comfortable with the two-best-answers problem; uses the text to adjudicate. Gets most argumentation items because the student already thinks in claims and evidence.
- Essays: averaging 5/6, with at least one sophistication point across the three. Theses hold two things in tension ("although / yet"). Row B at 4 on at least one essay: every claim explained, multiple techniques shown working together, indirect evidence used (title, secondary characters, final line). Prose is controlled and specific.
- Typical move: the essay notices what the text does *not* say, or how the ending complicates the opening, and sustains that observation rather than mentioning it once.

Test-day logistics

Before the exam

- **Device and Bluebook.** Your school tells you whether to bring your own device or use a school device. If it is yours, install Bluebook well in advance, complete exam setup when it opens, and charge the device fully. Bring a charger.
- **Practice in Bluebook** at least once.
- **What to bring:** a government or school ID if your school requires it, your device and charger, and pen or pencil for scratch paper if your school provides it. Follow your AP coordinator's instructions; policies on scratch paper and personal items vary by school.
- **What not to bring:** phones, smartwatches, notes, books, dictionaries. Anything that can connect to the internet is prohibited in the testing room beyond your testing device.

During the exam

- Section I is 60 minutes. Bluebook shows a countdown. You can move among questions within the section and flag questions to return to.
- A short break follows Section I.
- Section II is 120 minutes for all three essays together. You can move among the three prompts freely. Essays submit automatically at time.
- Bluebook provides highlighting and an annotation tool. Use them to mark the prompt's key term, shifts, and repeated words.
- There is no spell-check or grammar-check. Readers are instructed to treat essays as first drafts; minor errors do not cost points unless they interfere with meaning. Do not spend your last minutes polishing commas instead of adding a final piece of commentary.

- If your device fails, raise your hand. Bluebook saves work continuously and proctors have procedures for device problems. Do not panic and do not restart anything on your own.

Mental approach

- Readers expect a 40-minute draft, not a polished essay. Cross-outs (deletions, in the digital version) and uneven conclusions are normal.
- You are “rewarded for what you do well,” in the old AP phrasing. A strong paragraph you did not finish still earns the points it demonstrates.
- The sophistication point is rare. Chase a solid Row B first; a 1+4+0 essay beats a 1+3+0 with ornate language that never lands.
- If you blank on Q3, spend three to five minutes brainstorming everything you remember about your best-prepared work before you commit. The Chief Reader’s advice is “brainstorm, brainstorm, brainstorm.”

Quick reference: numbers to remember

ITEM	FIGURE
MCQs	55 in 60 minutes, 4 choices, 5 passages
Time per passage	about 12 minutes (10 if banking time)
Essays	3 in 120 minutes, 40 minutes suggested each
Points per essay	6 (1 + 4 + 1)
Section weights	MC 45%, essays 55%
Largest MC skill category	Narrator/speaker, 21–26%
“Student claim” MC items	about 6–7
Typical essay score nationally	about 3.2–3.5 out of 6
Students earning a 3 or higher	about 72–78% in recent years
Students earning a 5	about 14–17%

Where to verify anything in this document

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