



SCHOLAR COACH, INC.

AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

Structure (STR) — Skills 3.A–3.F

A complete study guide to the Structure big idea (plot, structure, contrast, significant events, and conflict) in AP English Literature and Composition. Structure questions are among the most frequent on the exam, and the "shift" is the most valuable single thing you can learn to find. Work through the concepts and readings, then complete the practice set. Keys are at the end.

Why Structure Matters on This Exam

Structure accounts for 16–20% of multiple-choice questions, about 9–11 of the 55, tied with Character as the second-largest category after Narration. It also underlies nearly every strong essay: the Chief Reader Reports repeatedly name "missing the turn" as a cause of low Row B scores. In 2024, readers noted that many students missed the turn at "But there the likeness ends" in the Set 1 poem. Structure also feeds the sophistication point, because paying attention to *how a text is built* is the surest way to notice tension and complexity.

The Enduring Understanding

STR-1 (official, paraphrased): The arrangement of the parts and sections of a text, the relationship of the parts to each other, and the sequence in which the text reveals information are all structural choices made by a writer that contribute to the reader's interpretation of a text.

In plain English: A writer decides *what comes when*. The order in which you learn things, where the text breaks, which parts are set side by side, and what is held back until the end are all choices, and each choice steers your interpretation. Structure is the text's blueprint. Analyzing structure means asking: "If the writer had arranged this differently, what meaning would be lost?"

The Six Skills, Translated

SKILL	OFFICIAL WORDING (PARAPHRASED)	PLAIN ENGLISH	UNITS EMPHASIZED
3.A	Identify and describe how plot orders events in a narrative.	Say what happens in what order, including flashbacks, gaps, and reversals.	1, 4, 6, 7

SKILL	OFFICIAL WORDING (PARAPHRASED)	PLAIN ENGLISH	UNITS EMPHASIZED
3.B	Explain the function of a particular sequence of events in a plot.	Explain why these events are arranged in this order.	1, 6, 7
3.C	Explain the function of structure in a text.	Explain what the overall arrangement (stanzas, paragraphs, sections, form) does for meaning.	2, 5, 8
3.D	Explain the function of contrasts within a text.	When two things are set against each other, explain what the contrast reveals.	2, 4, 6, 8
3.E	Explain the function of a significant event or related set of significant events in a plot.	Show how a pivotal event (a death, a choice, a reveal) changes the meaning of the work.	3, 9
3.F	Explain the function of conflict in a text.	Explain what the central struggle, inner or outer, shows or drives.	3, 9

Skills 3.A and 3.B are the plot-order skills; 3.C and 3.D are the arrangement-and-contrast skills (most heavily used in poetry); 3.E and 3.F are the big-picture skills of longer fiction and drama.

Key Concepts and Definitions

Plot Terms

TERM	DEFINITION
Exposition	Opening information about characters, setting, and situation.
Rising action	Complications that build tension.
Climax	The point of highest tension or turning point.
Falling action	Events following the climax.
Resolution / denouement	The tying up (or deliberate leaving open) of conflicts.
In medias res	Beginning in the middle of the action.
Flashback	Return to an earlier time.
Foreshadowing	A hint of later events.
Frame narrative	A story enclosing another story.
Nonlinear narrative	Events presented out of chronological order.

Do not memorize these only as vocabulary. For each one, practice the function question: *Why would the writer begin here? Why interrupt the action with this memory? Why delay the climax?*

Pacing

Pacing is the speed at which the narrative moves. Authors can summarize years in a sentence or dwell for a page on a single gesture. Whatever gets *more* space is being marked as important. A question that asks about pacing is usually asking what the writer wants you to linger on.

Structure in Poetry

TERM	DEFINITION
Stanza	A grouped set of lines; couplet (2), tercet (3), quatrain (4), cinquain (5), sestet (6), octave (8).
Line break / enjambment	The end of a poetic line. Enjambment runs the sentence over the break; an end-stopped line ends with the sense.
Caesura	A pause within a line.
Volta / turn / shift	A change in thought, tone, subject, or speaker's attitude.
Closed form	A poem that follows an established pattern (sonnet, villanelle).
Open form / free verse	A poem that does not follow a fixed pattern.
Refrain	A repeated line or lines.

Sonnet Structure

TYPE	PATTERN	TYPICAL TURN
Shakespearean (English)	Three quatrains plus a couplet; abab cdcd efef gg	After line 8, after line 12, or at the couplet
Petrarchan (Italian)	Octave (abbaabba) plus sestet (cdecde or cdcdcd)	At line 9

Signals of a Shift

A shift (turn) is announced by one or more of these:

1. A conjunction or transition: *but, yet, still, however, though, now, then*.
2. A stanza or paragraph break.
3. A change of tense (past to present).
4. A change of addressee or speaker.
5. A move from image to abstraction (or reverse).
6. A change in syntax (long, loose sentences become short and blunt).
7. A change in tone words, or a change in sound (harsh to smooth).

When you find a shift, label it with a formula: “The text moves from ___ to ___.” Then ask what the movement *means*.

Contrast and Juxtaposition

Contrast sets differences against each other; **juxtaposition** places two elements side by side without comment so the reader draws the conclusion. Contrasts can be between characters, settings, tones, times, images, or ideas. The function question is always: *what does the contrast make visible that neither element would show alone?*

Conflict

TYPE	DESCRIPTION
Internal	Within a character (desire vs. duty, belief vs. doubt).
External	Between a character and another character, society, nature, or fate.

On the exam, the most useful conflicts are those where both sides have legitimate claims. A conflict between right and wrong is simple; a conflict between two goods, or two fears, is the stuff of complexity.

Worked Close Reading 1: A Shift in a Sonnet (Skills 3.C, 3.D)

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 29 (1609, public domain):

When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes, I all alone bewep my outcast state, And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, And look upon myself and curse my fate, Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, Featured like him, like him with friends possessed, Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope, With what I most enjoy contented least; Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising, Haply I think on thee, and then my state, Like to the lark at break of day arising From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate; For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Step 1 — Paraphrase. The speaker, feeling unlucky and shunned, weeps and curses, envies others’ hope, looks, friends, skill, and range. But when, almost despising himself, he thinks of his beloved, his condition rises like a lark at dawn, and the memory of love is so valuable that he would not trade places with a king.

Step 2 — Find the sections. The sentence is one sentence for fourteen lines, but it breaks into movements: lines 1–4 (despair, isolation), 5–8 (envy), 9–12 (the turn and the lark), 13–14 (the conclusion).

Step 3 — Locate the shift. Line 9 begins with “**Yet**”, which is the volta (here a turn at the start of the third quatrain, not after line 8 as in a Petrarchan sonnet). The Shakespearean form lets the poet deliver two quatrains of misery before the turn, so the speaker’s despair has weight.

Step 4 — Notice the sound and image shifts. Before the turn the language is harsh and heavy: “disgrace,” “bewep,” “curse,” “bootless” (useless), “outcast,” “deaf heaven.” After the turn the imagery rises: “lark,” “break of day,” “arising,” “sings hymns at heaven’s gate.” The word **heaven** appears twice. First it is “deaf heaven,”

unresponsive to his cries; at the turn it is “heaven’s gate,” where the lark’s song reaches. The same destination that once ignored him now receives the song. That repetition is structural: the poem uses the same word to measure the change.

Step 5 — Name the contrast (3.D). The contrast is between *self-focused isolation* (“I all alone”) and *remembered connection* (“thee”). The first quatrain contains “I,” “my,” “myself” repeatedly; the turn introduces “thee.” The pronoun change enacts the cure.

Step 6 — State the function (3.C). The sonnet’s structure is its argument: the first eight lines build the speaker’s despair so thoroughly that the couplet’s claim (“I scorn to change my state with kings”) feels earned, not sentimental. The delayed arrival of “thee” in line 10 makes the beloved appear as a rescue. If the poem had begun with the beloved, the lark image would have no ground to rise from.

A model commentary sentence: By withholding the beloved until line 10, and by turning on the single word “Yet,” Shakespeare makes the speaker’s recovery feel like an interruption of his own despair, so that the final claim to “scorn” a king’s state reads not as boasting but as the surprised relief of someone who had expected to stay in the pit.

Worked Close Reading 2: Plot Order and Withheld Information (Skills 3.A, 3.B)

Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894, public domain) opens with this sentence:

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.

Step 1 — Describe the plot order (3.A). The story begins with the *news* of the death, presents Louise’s grief, moves her alone to an upstairs room for the discovery of freedom, returns her downstairs, and ends with her husband’s entrance and her death. The events occur over a single hour in roughly chronological order, with no flashback; the one backward glance is Louise’s brief memory of her marriage inside the central scene.

Step 2 — Notice what is withheld. The first sentence tells us two facts that frame the whole story: Louise has a “heart trouble,” and she is being protected from news. Chopin does not tell us until the end what actually kills her. The cause of death is held for the final line: “of the joy that kills.”

Step 3 — Explain the function of the sequence (3.B). Chopin’s order does two things.

1. It creates **dramatic irony**. Because we have watched the middle section, we know the “joy” was not reunion but the loss of her new freedom. The doctors do not know.
2. It allows the **heart trouble** from the first sentence to operate as a double reference: a physical ailment, and a figurative one (a heart oppressed by marriage). The structure turns an apparently medical detail into an emotional one only once the reader has seen the whole sequence.

Step 4 — Compare with a different order. If Chopin had begun with Louise’s thoughts of freedom and then revealed the news, the story would be a portrait of a woman’s discovery. By beginning with the *surface* version (a delicate woman, a death, careful friends) and moving inward, Chopin makes the reader repeat Louise’s own movement from public grief to private truth.

A model commentary sentence: Chopin opens with the community's account of Louise as a fragile widow and ends with the doctors' false diagnosis, so that the story's frame of misreading encloses the one hour in which she is seen truly, and the reader is made the only witness of the self the world cannot read.

Worked Close Reading 3: Contrast and Conflict in Prose (Skills 3.D, 3.F)

The following passage is **original**, written for this guide.

The morning the letter came, Tomas was in the orchard counting the trees, a thing he did whenever he was afraid. There were forty-one; there had always been forty-one. His father had planted them in the year of the long frost and told him that a man who knows what he owns knows who he is.

The letter was from the shipping office in the city. It offered a berth, a wage, a room "with a window onto the harbor." Tomas read it standing, then read it again, then folded it into his shirt pocket and went on counting.

At supper his mother set out the bread and said nothing about the envelope, which had been on the table since noon. His father did not look at it either. They ate in a silence that was not hostile, only thorough, the kind that had accumulated over years of agreeing not to say things. At last Tomas put down his spoon.

"Forty-one," he said.

His father nodded, as if this were the answer to something.

Skill 3.A / 3.B — order. Orchard (counting, fear) → letter (the offer) → supper (silence) → Tomas's one-word line. The passage withholds Tomas's decision. The final exchange ("Forty-one" / a nod) is ambiguous: is Tomas staying, or is he saying goodbye to what he owns?

Skill 3.D — contrasts. - *Orchard / harbor:* fixed, counted, inherited versus open, wage-earning, unknown. - *Counting / the letter:* Tomas uses numbers to manage fear; the letter offers something that cannot be counted. - *Speech / silence:* the family's "thorough" silence versus the single spoken number.

Skill 3.F — conflict. The conflict is internal (fear of leaving versus desire to leave) and external-social (family expectation, the father's maxim). Notice that the conflict is *not* resolved on the page. The passage ends at the point of maximum tension, with a line that fits both possible outcomes.

What the structure does. The passage is built around a repeated number. "Forty-one" appears at the start as a fear-habit and at the end as an answer. The repetition turns a counting tic into an act of communication. The father's nod suggests he understands the line as either an acceptance of the farm or a farewell inventory. The structure holds both readings, which is the complexity a Q2 prompt wants you to find.

How Structure Shows Up on the Multiple-Choice Section

Structure questions have a recognizable family of stems:

- "The shift in line 9 signals..." / "The poem's turn at line 9 marks a change from ___ to ___."
- "Lines 12–15 serve primarily to..."
- "The final stanza differs from the preceding stanzas in that it..."

- "The structure of the passage can best be described as..."
- "Which of the following best describes the function of the first paragraph in relation to the rest of the passage?"
- "The parenthetical remark in line 30 serves to..."
- "The question in line 7 is answered by..."
- "The passage as a whole moves from ___ to ___."

Common wrong-answer patterns: the **adjacent-unit trap** (the distractor describes the paragraph before or after), the **names-not-functions trap** ("is a flashback" when the question asks what the flashback does), and the **half-right shift** ("from joy to sorrow" when the actual shift is "from sorrow to resignation").

Sample Questions

1. In Sonnet 29, the word "Yet" in line 9 primarily signals

- A. the speaker's growing anger at his fate
- B. a turn from envy and despair toward a more hopeful frame of mind
- C. the speaker's resolution to change his circumstances
- D. a shift in addressee from the speaker's friends to heaven

Key: B. "Yet" introduces a reversal of the speaker's thought. (A) reverses the direction of the change. (C) overstates; he does not resolve to change circumstances, he changes his valuation. (D) misattributes the addressee; "thee" appears only afterward and the beloved is the new subject.

2. The repetition of "heaven" in line 3 ("deaf heaven") and line 12 ("heaven's gate") primarily serves to

- A. emphasize that the speaker's religious faith has been restored
- B. show that the same destination that rejected his cries receives his transformed song
- C. suggest that the speaker's despair and joy are equally excessive
- D. indicate that the speaker's change is temporary

Key: B. The repeated word measures the poem's reversal. (A) is overreach; faith is not the subject. (C) and (D) are unsupported by the couplet.

3. In "The Story of an Hour," the placement of the doctors' diagnosis in the final line functions primarily to

- A. resolve the question of whether Louise's husband is dead
- B. reveal that Louise had a secret illness
- C. expose the gap between how others read Louise and who she has become
- D. criticize the medical profession of the period

Key: C. The diagnosis is dramatic irony. (A) is the wrong question; the husband's survival is revealed one sentence earlier. (B) is a literal reading. (D) is outside the story's focus.

4. In the original orchard passage, the final exchange ("Forty-one." / His father nodded) is best described as

- A. a resolution of Tomas's internal conflict
- B. a deliberately ambiguous moment that holds both acceptance and farewell
- C. a sign that Tomas's father disapproves of the letter
- D. a flashback to Tomas's childhood

Key: B. The repeated number carries opposing meanings and the nod acknowledges without settling them. (A) is premature; the conflict is not resolved. (C) misreads the nod. (D) is not a flashback.

How Structure Shows Up on the Free-Response Section

Question 1 (Poetry)

Because poems are short, structure is nearly always in play: the Chief Reader Reports encourage students to “map the punctuation” and find where the poem turns. A strong Q1 thesis often names the poem’s structural movement.

A model thesis (Sonnet 29, if given the prompt “analyze how the poet conveys the speaker’s complex attitude toward his own life”):

Shakespeare’s speaker is not simply consoled by love; the sonnet’s delayed turn at “Yet” and its borrowing of the same word, “heaven,” to measure his before and after reveal that his contentment is hard-won and provisional, a victory over self-contempt rather than a freedom from it.

A model body paragraph:

The poem’s first eight lines are built as an inventory of lack, and the syntax makes the inventory feel endless. The sentence begins at “When” and does not reach a main clause until “Haply I think on thee” in line 10, so the reader waits through two quatrains of subordinate clauses in the same suspended state as the speaker. Within that waiting, the pronouns “I,” “me,” “myself,” and “my” accumulate until the speaker’s whole world is himself. When the turn comes, it arrives in a single syllable, “Yet,” and the first word after it is a clause about “these thoughts myself almost despising,” which means the turn begins not with joy but with self-disgust. Shakespeare delays the beloved until the tenth line, and when “thee” finally appears, it is the first second-person pronoun in the poem. The structure is therefore an argument about how consolation works: not by erasing the speaker’s despair but by interrupting it with another person.

Question 2 (Prose)

Structure in prose means paragraph order, shifts in narrative distance, flashbacks, and endings. In the Chief Reader Reports, students who treated the passage as a single mood, rather than tracking its movement, scored lower in Row B.

A model thesis (for the orchard passage and a prompt on Tomas’s complex experience):

The passage organizes Tomas’s decision around a ritual of counting, so that the number forty-one first measures his fear, then becomes the only words he can offer his family, revealing that the choice between staying and leaving is not a choice between two places but a negotiation over whether he can say goodbye without saying it.

Question 3 (Literary Argument)

Structure prompts include “an author’s manipulation of time” (1986), “parallel or recurring events” (1977), “opening scene” (1972), “ending” (1973), and “an illuminating episode” (2011). Prepare for each of your texts: what is the opening scene’s function, what is the ending’s, where is the pivotal event (3.E), and what is the central conflict (3.F)?

A model Q3 thesis (2025 prompt on a character significantly affected by a memory; text: *Beloved*):

Morrison arranges *Beloved* so that Sethe’s memory of the killing arrives in pieces, circling and returning, because for Sethe memory is not recollection but re-inhabitation; the novel’s fractured structure forces the reader into the same condition, unable to look away and unable to take in the whole.

Practice Exercises

Answers are in the Answer Key.

Exercise 1 (Skill 3.A). Write a three-sentence description of the plot order of “The Story of an Hour,” naming where the story begins, where it turns, and where it ends. Do not interpret yet.

Exercise 2 (Skill 3.B). Explain in 4–5 sentences why Chopin might place the news of Mr. Mallard’s death in the first sentence rather than revealing it later. What interpretive effect does that order have?

Exercise 3 (Skill 3.C). Divide Sonnet 29 into its three or four movements, giving each a short label (e.g., “despair”). Then explain in two sentences how the final couplet answers the first quatrain.

Exercise 4 (Skill 3.D). In the orchard passage, identify two contrasts. For each, write one sentence naming what the contrast reveals.

Exercise 5 (Skill 3.E). Name a significant event in a longer work you have read (a death, a betrayal, a decision). In a paragraph, explain how the work would mean something different if that event were removed or moved.

Exercise 6 (Skill 3.F). Choose a conflict from a work you know. Classify it as internal or external (or both), state the two forces in tension, and explain in two sentences whether the conflict is resolved and what the answer says about the work.

Exercise 7 (Shift finding). Read the following original lines. Locate the shift and name its signals.

The house is quiet now, the dishes dry, the porch light off, the cat asleep in the chair. I tell myself I’m done with all the crying. But on the stair a child’s shoe, left behind, sits like a small and patient animal, and I am sitting down beside it, crying.

Exercise 8 (MCQ writing). Write one structure question (four options) about the original shoe poem in Exercise 7. Make the key a function answer (“serves to...”), make one distractor name a device without function, and make one distractor the adjacent-unit trap.

Common Misconceptions

“The turn is always at line 9.” In a Petrarchan sonnet, yes. In a Shakespearean sonnet it can fall at line 9 (as in Sonnet 29), line 13, or elsewhere. Free verse and other forms have shifts wherever the content moves. Find the shift by signals, not by counting.

“Structure means the five-part plot diagram.” The plot diagram is one tool. Many AP passages are excerpts that have no full arc. Focus on movement within the passage: what changes between the first and last paragraph?

“Identifying structure is enough.” “The poem has three stanzas” earns nothing. “The third stanza reverses the first two by moving from the speaker’s complaint to a command” begins to. Always continue to function.

“A flashback is just background.” A flashback tells you why the writer interrupted the present, and the interruption itself is meaningful. Ask what the present moment needs from the past.

“Conflict means a fight.” Internal conflicts are often the most important on the exam. Silence can be conflict, as the orchard passage shows.

“Endings must resolve.” Many AP texts end ambiguously. Ask what the open ending *asks the reader to do*, and what would be lost if the ending were closed.

“Contrast and compare are the same.” Contrast stresses differences. A strong contrast analysis also asks what the two things share, since their shared ground is what makes the difference meaningful.

Quick Reference: Structural Questions to Ask Every Text

1. Where does the text begin and end? Why start and stop there?
2. Where is the biggest shift? What signals it?
3. What repeats? What changes in the repetition?
4. What is contrasted? What does each side make visible?
5. What is withheld, and when is it revealed?
6. If I moved one section, what meaning would I lose?

Answer Key

Exercise 1 (model). The story opens with friends and family breaking the news of Mr. Mallard’s death to Louise, whose heart is weak. She weeps, then retreats alone to an upstairs room where she gradually recognizes a sense of freedom, and the story turns when she leaves the room, descends, and meets her husband returning unharmed. It ends with her death and the doctors’ diagnosis.

Exercise 2 (model). Putting the news first makes the reader enter the story through the community’s version of Louise: a delicate woman to be handled with care. That version is a performance of grief and protection which the following pages undermine. The order also loads the opening with a physical detail, “heart trouble,” that the ending reinterprets as emotional. Had the news come later, the story would be a drama about a woman’s discovery; by placing it first, Chopin turns the story into a contest between the world’s account of Louise and the truth the reader alone sees.

Exercise 3 (model). Movements: (1) lines 1–4, outcast despair; (2) lines 5–8, envy of others; (3) lines 9–12, the turn through memory of the beloved and the lark image; (4) lines 13–14, the couplet’s conclusion. The couplet answers the first quatrain by reversing its terms: where the speaker began “in disgrace with fortune,” he ends scorning to “change my state with kings,” and where he began “all alone,” he ends enriched by “thy sweet love remembered.”

Exercise 4 (sample). (1) Orchard (counted, inherited) versus harbor (open, unknown): the contrast reveals that the offer threatens an identity built on knowing what one owns. (2) Silence versus the single spoken “Forty-one”: the contrast reveals that the family communicates through omission, so that one number carries the weight of a whole conversation.

Exercise 5. Open response. Full credit: a specific event in a named work; a statement of what the event changes (character, theme, plot direction); and an explanation of what meaning would be lost if the event were absent or moved (not merely “the plot would be different”). Example: In *Hamlet*, if the play-within-a-play came before the ghost’s appearance, the Mousetrap would test nothing and Hamlet’s delay would lose its justification; the event’s placement is what turns hesitation into strategy.

Exercise 6. Open response. Full credit: a type of conflict named correctly; both opposing forces stated precisely; a position on resolution; and a function (what the conflict or its resolution reveals about the work’s concerns).

Exercise 7 (model). The shift occurs at line 4, “But on the stair.” Signals: the conjunction “But”; the change from the abstract, general scene (the house, the dishes) to a single concrete object (the shoe); and a change of verb tense and stance from the speaker’s resolution (“I tell myself I’m done”) to the undoing of it (“I am sitting down beside it, crying”). The final line also repeats “crying” from line 3, which makes the poem circular and undermines the speaker’s claim.

Exercise 8 (model). The shift that begins with “But” in the fourth line primarily serves to (A) introduce a new speaker who contradicts the first (B) expose the speaker’s earlier claim of composure as self-deception (KEY) (C) use a conjunction to separate two stanzas (*names a device without function*) (D) describe the quiet condition of the house (*adjacent-unit trap: describes lines 1–2*)

Want a plan built around **your** student?

BOOK NOW →