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AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

Prose and Drama MCQ: 12 Question Types Step by Step

This guide teaches you to recognize and solve every kind of multiple-choice question the AP English Literature exam asks about prose fiction and drama. Read the 3-read prose protocol first, read the four anchor passages once, then work through the twelve question types in order, doing the practice items as you go. Check your work against the Master Key at the end.

How prose and drama questions work

Section I has 55 four-option questions on 5 passages in 60 minutes. At least two passages are prose fiction (drama counts as prose fiction for this purpose), and most exams carry three prose or drama sets. Short fiction accounts for roughly 42-49 percent of the multiple-choice weighting and longer fiction or drama for 15-18 percent. Each passage carries 8-13 questions, in the order of the passage, with whole-passage questions last. Every question has four choices (A-D), the exam is taken in Bluebook, and you should answer every question because there is no guessing penalty.

The skill categories most heavily tested on prose are Narrator (21-26 percent of all questions), Character (16-20 percent), and Structure (16-20 percent), with Setting (3-6 percent), Word Choice and Imagery (10-13 percent), Comparison (10-13 percent), and Literary Argumentation (10-13 percent) filling out the rest.

Authors, titles, and dates for prose are usually withheld. You are expected to read what is on the page, not to recognize the book.

Part 1: The 3-read prose protocol and pacing

Prose passages run 40-70 lines. You have about 12 minutes per passage, so you read once carefully, mark as you go, and reread only what the questions send you back to.

Read 1: Get oriented (about 2 minutes)

Read at normal pace, one paragraph at a time. At the end of each paragraph write a **five-word gist** in the margin or in a Bluebook note. These gists give you the passage's structure for free. While reading, answer five questions:

QUESTION	WHAT YOU NOTE
Who tells it?	first person or third; how close to the character; any bias
Who is on the page?	every character, including minor ones
Where and when?	the setting and what it feels like
What happens (or fails to)?	the situation in one phrase
Where does it turn?	a change in tone, subject, time, or attitude

Read the italic context header carefully. A sentence like “In this scene, the heroine’s cousin presents her with a proposal of marriage” can save you a minute of confusion.

Read 2: Patterns (during Read 1 if you can; otherwise 30 seconds)

Mark repetition, contrast, irony (a gap between what is said and what is meant), and any sentence that is unusually long, short, or interrupted. These are the things the questions will ask about.

Read 3: Question-driven

For every line-cited question, reread the cited lines **plus the sentence before and after**. Never answer from memory of the first read. Prose is cumulative: a word means something because of what came before it.

Pacing

TASK	TIME
Read the passage with gists	2.5-3 min
Line-cited questions	about 45 sec each
Whole-passage questions (tone, purpose, structure, character)	about 1 min each; do these last
Total per passage	11-12 min

If you are behind, answer every line-cited question on the remaining passages first; they can be answered locally.

The anchor passages

The worked examples and practice items use four short texts. Passages A, B, and C are **original, written for this guide** (not excerpts from published works). Passage D is the famous opening of a public-domain novel, quoted in full from the first paragraph and a few lines of the dialogue that follows.

Anchor Passage A: “The Landing” (original)

Marta had arrived at the landing an hour before the ferry was due, ¹ which was how she arrived everywhere, and she spent the hour arranging her luggage into a shape that would look, to anyone who cared to

observe it, like the luggage of a woman with nothing to hide. The suitcase went upright against the bench; the hatbox, which held no hat, sat on top of it. Across the water the town she was leaving showed its roofs in neat gray rows, and she found that she could not remember a single one of them clearly, though she had walked beneath them for thirty-one years. A boy with a bucket came and went. A gull, patient and unlovely, considered her sandwich and was refused. "You'll be wanting the nine o'clock," said the ticket man, without looking up, and she said that she would, and felt, absurdly, that she had been caught.

What she felt was not sorrow. Sorrow would have been a kind of company. It was closer to the sensation of standing up too quickly, when the room tilts and then, with a small and mortifying lurch, consents to be a room again. She smoothed her gloves. She would write to her sister from the other side; she had composed the first sentence three times already, and each time it began with an apology.

Anchor Passage B: "The Watch" (original)

I want it understood that I bear my brother no ill will. I have said so to everyone who has asked, and to several who have not. When Father's watch passed to him, I was the first to shake his hand, and if my hand was cold, it was a cold evening. The watch is a handsome object, I am told. I have not looked at it closely, having no particular reason to. It has been said in town that Edmund has not wound it once since the funeral, which I mention only because it is the sort of thing one hears, and not because I have been keeping track. Mother says I am too hard on him. I am never hard on him. I am merely accurate, and accuracy, as Father used to say, is the courtesy we owe the truth.

Last Sunday Edmund came to dinner and brought the watch, though no one had asked to see it. He set it on the tablecloth between the salt and the bread, where it ticked. It was ticking, so he had wound it after all, which proves only that he winds it when people are watching.

Anchor Passage C: "The Waiting Room" (original drama)

A small office, late afternoon. DORA, an older woman, sits stiffly in a chair. Her son TOMAS stands at the window with his coat still on.

DORA: You needn't hover. If you're going to sit, sit.

TOMAS: I'm fine here.

DORA: You've been fine there for twenty minutes. The window isn't going to change its mind.

TOMAS: They said it wouldn't be long.

DORA: They said that to your father. (A pause. She straightens her collar.) Not that it signified. He liked to be told things.

TOMAS: Mama.
DORA: What? I'm making conversation. Isn't that what people do in
rooms like this? 10
TOMAS: (turning at last) You could ask me how I am.
DORA: How are you?
TOMAS: (after a long moment) Fine.
DORA: There. We're both very good at it.
(The door opens. A NURSE appears, glances at a clipboard, and does 15
not say either name.)
NURSE: Mrs.--?
DORA: (rising before the name can be found) Yes. 18

Anchor Passage D: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), opening (public domain)

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in 1
possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.
However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be
on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed
in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the 5
rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.
"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you
heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"
Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.
"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, 10
and she told me all about it."
Mr. Bennet made no answer.
"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife
impatiently.
"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it." 14

Part 2: The question types

Each type has the same structure: two real-style stems, a step-by-step method, the distractor patterns, one fully worked example, and two practice items. Practice items are numbered P1, P2, and so on, and keyed at the end.

Type 1: Narrator, point of view, and reliability

What it looks like

- "The narrator of the passage can best be described as..."
- "The narrator's reliability is called into question by..."

Also "The point of view of the passage is...", "The use of 'we' in line 3 primarily...", "The phrase 'I am told' (line 4) suggests that the narrator...". These are Skill 4 items (4.A-4.D) and the largest single category on the exam.

Method

1. Identify person: "I" (first), "you" (second), "he/she/they" (third). Then ask how much the narrator knows: one character's mind (limited), many minds (omniscient), no minds (objective).

2. Ask **distance**: does the narration sit close inside a character, or does it stand back and comment?
3. For reliability, look for gaps: what the narrator says versus what the details show. Signs: protests too much, contradictions, details reported accidentally, defensive tone, self-serving explanations.
4. For function questions, finish the sentence "Because the story is told this way, the reader..." The key explains an effect on the reader's understanding.

Distractor patterns

- *Opposite*: calls a limited narrator omniscient, or an unreliable narrator candid.
- *Overreach*: "deliberately lies" when the text supports only "is not fully aware of."
- *Right label, wrong effect*.
- *Wrong agent*: attributes a thought to a character that belongs to the narrator.

Worked example (Passage B)

Which of the following best describes the narrator's attitude toward his brother, as revealed in the passage? (A) Generous acceptance of Edmund's inheritance (B) Indifference to the watch and to Edmund (C) Resentment that the narrator denies while his own words expose it (D) Concern for Edmund's grief

Step 1: first person, brother and watch. Step 2: close distance; the narrator is arguing his case. Step 3: look for gaps. He opens with "I bear my brother no ill will" and says it "to several who have not" asked; he says he has "no particular reason" to look at the watch but then reports exactly who has and has not wound it; "not because I have been keeping track" is itself a denial of tracking; he claims he is "never hard on him" immediately after reporting his mother's complaint. Step 4: the narrator's claims of calm are contradicted by his attention. (A) accepts the claim at face value. (B) is contradicted by the tracking. (D) invents a motive. **(C)** is the only choice that holds both halves.

Practice

P1. (Passage A) The point of view of Passage A is best described as (A) first person, with the narrator recalling a past departure (B) third person limited, sharing Marta's perceptions while the narration occasionally comments with dry irony (C) third person omniscient, revealing the thoughts of several characters (D) objective, describing only what can be seen and heard

P2. (Passage B) The phrase "which I mention only because it is the sort of thing one hears" (lines 7-8) primarily serves to (A) show that the narrator is reluctant to gossip (B) allow the narrator to pass along a criticism of Edmund while claiming not to intend one (C) indicate that Edmund's behavior is widely admired (D) suggest that the narrator is a source of reliable information

Type 2: Characterization

What it looks like

- "In lines 1-5, the narrator characterizes Marta as..."
- "Dora's remark in line 5 reveals that she..."

Also "The relationship between Dora and Tomas is best described as...", "Mrs. Bennet is portrayed as...". Skill 1.A, 1.D, 1.E.

Method

1. Sort the evidence into the four channels: what the character **does**, **says**, **thinks**, and **what others (or the narrator) say about her**. Mark which channel the cited lines use.
2. Find the specific detail the question points at and name the trait it reveals in one adjective.
3. Check for **complexity**: characters on this exam are rarely one thing. Paired-adjective choices ("controlling and anxious") often reward the answer that holds two traits.
4. Verify the key against the whole passage. A trait must not be contradicted elsewhere.

Distractor patterns

- *One trait right, one wrong* in a pair.
- *Overreach*: "paranoid" for "careful."
- *Wrong agent*: gives the trait of one character to the other.
- *Trait the passage never shows*.

Worked example (Passage A, lines 1-5)

The details of the luggage in lines 1-5 characterize Marta as (A) frugal and organized (B) self-conscious and preoccupied with how she appears to others (C) carefree and eager to leave (D) sentimental and attached to her possessions

Step 1: channel: what she does and the narrator's comment. She arrives an hour early, arranges the luggage "into a shape that would look, to anyone who cared to observe it, like the luggage of a woman with nothing to hide." Step 2: the shape is for an audience; "nothing to hide" implies she has something to hide. The hatbox "held no hat." Step 3: complexity: orderly yet anxious. (A) names order but not the anxiety or audience. (C) is contradicted by the early arrival and the staging. (D) is unsupported. **(B)**.

Practice

P3. (Passage C) Dora's remark "He liked to be told things" (line 7) most clearly suggests that Dora (A) admired her husband's patience (B) regards her husband's trust in what he was told as naive (C) was angry at the staff for lying to him (D) is eager for news about her own condition

P4. (Passage D) Mr. Bennet's response in line 14 characterizes him as (A) indifferent to local gossip and annoyed by his wife (B) teasing and wry, aware of his wife's eagerness (C) deeply curious but too proud to ask (D) cruel to his wife

Type 3: Setting and its function

What it looks like

- "The description of the town in lines 6-9 primarily serves to..."
- "The setting of the passage functions mainly to..."

Also "The relationship between the character and her surroundings...", "The details of the landscape most directly emphasize...". Skill 2.B and 2.C.

Method

1. List the concrete details of place and time in the cited lines.
2. Ask: what **values or feelings** do the details carry (order, coldness, confinement, freedom, decay)? Setting is rarely only "where."

3. Ask how the setting relates to the character: does she fit it, resist it, or see it differently from how it is?
4. The key links a detail to a function: reveals a character's state, establishes mood, contributes to a conflict.

Distractor patterns

- *Setting as mere location*: a key that only says where.
- *Overreach*: asserts a symbolic meaning the details do not support.
- *Wrong relation*: says the character belongs when she is leaving.

Worked example (Passage A, lines 6-9)

The description of the town in lines 6-9 ("neat gray rows," "could not remember a single one of them clearly") primarily serves to (A) suggest that the town is poor and neglected (B) show that Marta's long familiarity with the town has left no vivid attachment (C) establish that the town is far from the landing (D) imply that Marta is suffering from poor memory

Step 1: details: "neat gray rows," she cannot recall any roof though she lived there thirty-one years. Step 2: values: uniformity, blandness; she is detached. Step 3: relation: the town is behind her emotionally before she leaves. (A) misreads "neat." (C) uses only a location sense. (D) literalizes. **(B)**.

Practice

P5. (Passage C) The stage direction describing the setting as "a small office, late afternoon," combined with Tomas's coat remaining on, primarily suggests (A) that the scene is a pleasant domestic gathering (B) that Tomas is uneasy and unwilling to settle into the situation (C) that the meeting will be brief and routine (D) that Tomas is about to leave

P6. (Passage A) The "boy with a bucket" and the "gull, patient and unlovely" (lines 9-10) serve primarily to (A) show that the landing is a dangerous place (B) offer ordinary, indifferent details that contrast with Marta's private tension (C) foreshadow an accident (D) establish that Marta dislikes animals

Type 4: Dialogue and its function

What it looks like

- "The ticket man's remark in lines 11-12 serves primarily to..."
- "Dora's repeated questions in lines 8-10 are best understood as..."

Also "The dialogue in lines 7-14 suggests that...", "The pattern of interruptions...". Skill 1.A, 1.D, 3.C.

Method

1. Identify who speaks to whom and what each wants.
2. Distinguish **surface** (what is said) from **subtext** (what is meant, avoided, or revealed).
3. Notice style: short replies, interruptions, silence, deflection, formal address, and what the speakers do **not** say (Passage C: neither name is said).
4. Name the function: reveals relationship, shows conflict, advances the situation, exposes what a character conceals.

Distractor patterns

- *Surface-only reading*: takes the remark at face value when it is evasive.
- *Wrong subtext*: attributes hostility to a remark that shows fear.

- *Overreach*: concludes plot facts the dialogue does not give.

Worked example (Passage C, lines 11-14)

In lines 11-14, Tomas's "Fine" and Dora's response ("We're both very good at it") primarily reveal that (A) the two have resolved their disagreement (B) both are concealing their distress behind a shared habit of avoiding feeling (C) Dora is mocking Tomas's lack of manners (D) Tomas has no concern about the situation

Step 1: Tomas asks Dora to ask how he is; she does; he pauses "a long moment" before answering "Fine." Step 2: surface: he's fine; subtext: the pause and the request show he isn't. Dora's "very good at it" shows she knows. Step 3: both avoid feeling. (A) reads surface only. (C) misses the mutuality ("We're both"). (D) is contradicted by the pause. **(B)**.

Practice

P7. (Passage D) Mrs. Bennet's phrase "cried his wife impatiently" (line 13) combined with Mr. Bennet's reply primarily creates (A) a sense of equal partnership (B) humor from the contrast between her eagerness and his dry restraint (C) tension about an impending crisis (D) sympathy for Mr. Bennet's isolation

P8. (Passage C) The stage direction in line 15-16 (the Nurse "does not say either name") most likely indicates that (A) the Nurse has forgotten the patient's name (B) the situation is impersonal and the Nurse's uncertainty adds to the characters' anxiety (C) the Nurse is hostile to Dora and Tomas (D) Dora and Tomas are the wrong visitors

Type 5: Tone and attitude

What it looks like

- "The tone of the passage as a whole is best described as..."
- "The narrator's attitude toward Marta is best described as..."

Also paired adjectives ("wry and sympathetic"), "tone of lines 13-17", mood questions. Skill 4.C.

Method

1. Name the **target**: tone toward what? (Marta? the town? the narrator himself?)
2. Underline loaded words: "absurdly," "mortifying," "unlovely," "merely accurate."
3. Decide valence, then intensity, then register. Predict two words.
4. Match to the choices. For pairs, both must hold; a pair like "scornful and amused" will fail if there is no scorn.
5. Watch for **mixed tones**: a narrator can be gently ironic yet sympathetic. The key often holds both.

Distractor patterns

- *Too extreme*.
- *Wrong target*: the tone of the character, not of the narrator.
- *Opposite valence*.
- *Synonymous pair*.

Worked example (Passage A, whole passage)

The narrator's attitude toward Marta is best described as (A) harshly critical (B) gently ironic yet sympathetic (C) admiring and celebratory (D) detached and indifferent

Step 1: target: Marta. Step 2: loaded words: "absurdly," "mortifying lurch," "nothing to hide" (ironic), "the hatbox, which held no hat" (wry); but "Sorrow would have been a kind of company" is tender. Step 3: the narrator smiles at her staging but understands the loneliness. (A) and (C) are too extreme and wrong in valence. (D) ignores the sympathy. **(B)**.

Practice

P9. (Passage B) The tone of the passage is best described as (A) mournful and reflective (B) defensive and subtly spiteful (C) humorous and affectionate (D) calm and objective

P10. (Passage D, lines 1-6) The tone of the opening paragraph is best described as (A) earnest and didactic (B) wryly satirical (C) bitter and resentful (D) nostalgic

Type 6: Diction and word in context

What it looks like

- "In context, 'consents' (line 16) most nearly means..."
- "The word 'mortifying' (line 15) contributes to..."

Also "The word choice in lines 13-17 primarily reveals...", "The narrator's use of 'merely' (line 9) emphasizes...". Skill 5.A, 5.B.

Method

1. Reread the sentence. Cover the word and predict a replacement.
2. Substitute each choice. Reject anything that breaks grammar or sense.
3. **The trap is the common meaning.** The exam picks words whose everyday sense is wrong in context.
4. For diction-effect questions, name the **connotation** of the word and what it adds that a neutral synonym would not. "Mortifying" (embarrassing, deathly) gives the lurch a note of shame.

Distractor patterns

- *Familiar-but-wrong denotation.*
- *Right denotation, wrong connotation.*
- *Too broad or too narrow for a phrase.*

Worked example (Passage A, line 16)

In context, "consents" (line 16) most nearly means (A) agrees after hesitation (B) gives permission (C) signs a legal agreement (D) regrets

Step 1: the room "tilts and then, with a small and mortifying lurch, consents to be a room again." Step 2: prediction: "agrees," "allows itself." Step 3: (B) "gives permission" is the dictionary sense but misses the reluctance of "lurch." (C) is legal and out of context. (D) is unrelated. **(A)** captures the personifying sense that the room yields only after wobbling.

Practice

P11. (Passage B, line 10) "Accuracy... is the courtesy we owe the truth" is a statement that, in context, primarily (A) shows the narrator's gratitude for Father's advice (B) lets the narrator dress up his criticisms as a matter of principle (C) mocks the idea of truthfulness (D) reveals that the narrator is dishonest about facts

P12. (Passage A, line 10) The word “unlovely” in describing the gull primarily (A) criticizes the gull for stealing (B) conveys the plain, unglamorous quality of the scene and Marta’s flat mood (C) suggests that the gull is diseased (D) praises the gull’s persistence

Type 7: Syntax

What it looks like

- “The syntax of the sentence in lines 13-17 (‘What she felt ... a room again’) primarily serves to...”
- “The sentence in lines 3-5 is structured so that...”

Also “The shift from long sentences to a short one in line 17 emphasizes...”, “The use of parallel structure in...”.
Skill 4.C, 5.B.

Method

1. Describe the sentence plainly: long or short? One main clause or many? Interrupted by dashes or commas?
A short sentence after long ones?
2. Ask what the **form** does: a long sentence that lurches and recovers (line 14-17) mimics the lurching room; a short sentence after it (“She smoothed her gloves.”) restores composure.
3. Connect form to meaning. The key ties structure to the effect on the reader or on characterization.
4. Don’t pick a choice that merely names a sentence type without effect, unless the stem asks only for the type.

Distractor patterns

- *Label without effect.*
- *Wrong label* (called “periodic” when it is cumulative).
- *Overreach.*

Worked example (Passage A, lines 14-17)

The syntax of the sentence beginning “It was closer to the sensation” (lines 14-17) primarily serves to (A) accelerate the pace to suggest panic (B) enact in the sentence’s winding, delayed structure the lurch and recovery it describes (C) reduce the sentence to a simple declaration (D) contrast Marta’s calm with the narrator’s agitation

Step 1: the sentence is long, with a “when” clause interrupted by “then,” then a parenthetical “with a small and mortifying lurch,” and finally lands on “consents to be a room again.” Step 2: the wobble and settle are in the syntax itself. Step 3: (A) is wrong; the pace is delayed, not accelerated. (C) is false. (D) invents a narrator in agitation. **(B).**

Practice

P13. (Passage A, line 17) The short sentence “She smoothed her gloves” following a long sentence primarily serves to (A) delay the plot (B) return Marta to outward composure after the description of her inner lurch (C) signal that the ferry has arrived (D) show that Marta is physically ill

P14. (Passage D, lines 1-2) The sentence “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” gains its effect primarily from (A) its simple, direct statement of a proven fact (B) a formal, sweeping structure that sounds like a law of nature while expressing a social assumption (C) its unusual vocabulary (D) a sudden shift to the first person

Type 8: Irony

What it looks like

- "The phrase 'a woman with nothing to hide' (lines 3-4) is ironic because..."
- "Which of the following is an example of irony in the passage?"

Also "The narrator's remark in line 4 ('I am told') functions ironically by..." "The ironic effect of lines 1-6 depends on..." Skill 4.D, 3.D.

Method

1. Identify the **kind** of irony: **verbal** (saying one thing, meaning another), **situational** (outcome opposite to expectation), or **dramatic** (the reader knows what a character does not).
2. Find the gap: what is said versus what is true.
3. Ask who is the source of the irony: the narrator, the character, or the situation itself.
4. The key states both sides of the gap.

Distractor patterns

- *Calls a plain statement ironic.*
- *Wrong kind of irony.*
- *Misses the target:* attributes the irony to the character when it is the narrator's.

Worked example (Passage D, lines 1-2)

The opening sentence is ironic primarily because (A) it is clearly false (B) it presents a self-serving social assumption as a universal truth, and the surrounding paragraph shows it is the families who want the marriage (C) it is spoken by a character who does not believe it (D) it contradicts the paragraph that follows

Step 1: verbal irony by the narrator. Step 2: the gap: the grand claim ("universally acknowledged") versus the second paragraph's reveal that it is the neighborhood families who treat the man as "the rightful property" of a daughter. Step 3: the narrator's voice is the source. (A) misses that the point is the gap, not falsity. (C) is wrong: no character speaks it. (D) is wrong: the paragraph elaborates it. **(B)**.

Practice

P15. (Passage B) The narrator's statement "I am never hard on him. I am merely accurate" is ironic because (A) it contradicts the narrator's preceding admission of cruelty (B) the reader can see that the narrator's meticulous attention to Edmund's faults is itself a form of hardness (C) Mother agrees with it (D) it is a joke the narrator makes at his own expense

P16. (Passage A, line 12) The ticket man's remark "You'll be wanting the nine o'clock" produces a moment of situational irony because (A) Marta wanted an earlier ferry (B) a casual comment makes Marta feel caught in a secret that no one actually suspects (C) the ticket man is lying (D) the nine o'clock ferry is delayed

Type 9: Structure and sequence

What it looks like

- "The second paragraph of Passage A differs from the first in that it..."
- "Which of the following best describes the structure of Passage B?"

Also "The passage moves from ___ to ___"; "The function of the first paragraph in relation to the rest..."; "The parenthetical in line 12..." Skill 3.A-3.C.

Method

1. Use your five-word gists. Read them in order: that is the structure.
2. Name each section's job: setting up, complicating, reversing, resolving, reflecting.
3. Find the **turn**: the paragraph break, the shift from external to internal, from description to commentary.
4. The key describes the move from part to part in a function verb. Check "from ___ to ___" in both slots.

Distractor patterns

- *One slot right.*
- *Reversed order.*
- *Content only*: lists what is in a section without a relationship.

Worked example (Passage A)

The passage as a whole moves from (A) memory of the town to anticipation of the ferry ride (B) outward behavior and external details to Marta's private feeling (C) conflict with the ticket man to reconciliation (D) admiration of the landing to rejection of it

Step 1: gists: paragraph 1: Marta arranges luggage and observes town; paragraph 2: what she feels, what she will write. Step 2: first paragraph is external action and observed detail; second is interior. Step 3: (A) is half right at best; the ferry ride is not anticipated. (C) is false: no reconciliation. (D) is invented. **(B)**.

Practice

P17. (Passage B) The structure of the passage is best described as (A) a general claim of goodwill followed by increasingly specific details that undercut the claim (B) a chronological account of a single dinner (C) a debate between two siblings (D) a series of unrelated anecdotes

P18. (Passage C) Lines 12-14 ("You could ask me how I am") function in the scene primarily as (A) the climax of the conflict (B) the point at which suppressed feeling momentarily surfaces before being covered again (C) the resolution of the argument (D) comic relief unrelated to the main situation

Type 10: Inference about situation and relationships

What it looks like

- "It can be inferred from the passage that Marta..."
- "Which of the following best describes the relationship between Dora and Tomas?"

Also "The passage suggests that Edmund...", "The final line suggests that...". Skill 1.D, 4.C. This is the most frequent type across released exams.

Method

1. Ask: what is **actually on the page** that supports each choice? Point to the words.
2. An inference is a **necessary or very likely** conclusion from the text, not merely a possible one. The key adds nothing the text does not license.
3. Eliminate choices that require outside information or a leap.
4. Prefer the choice that explains *more* of the details.

Distractor patterns

- *True-but-not-inferable.*
- *Overreach.*
- *Plausible story, no evidence.*

Worked example (Passage C)

It can be inferred from the scene that Dora and Tomas are waiting to receive (A) a legal ruling about an inheritance (B) medical or institutional news that could be difficult, and that Dora's husband has been in a similar situation before (C) a job offer for Tomas (D) news of Dora's travel

Step 1: "a small office," "a Nurse," "a clipboard," "They said that to your father." Step 2: the setting is medical or institutional (Nurse); "your father" suggests a previous wait with comparable news. Step 3: (A) and (C) and (D) have no support. **(B)**. Notice how little the key claims: "medical or institutional news that could be difficult." It does not say who is ill.

Practice

P19. (Passage A) It can be inferred that Marta's decision to leave (A) was made recently and impulsively (B) is a significant departure she has been preparing for and is uneasy about (C) is a formal assignment from her employer (D) was caused by a quarrel with the ticket man

P20. (Passage B) The final sentence ("which proves only that he winds it when people are watching") suggests that the narrator (A) is reconsidering his judgment of Edmund (B) interprets even evidence against his claim as further proof of Edmund's faults (C) has reconciled with his brother (D) believes Edmund is generous

Type 11: Contrast

What it looks like

- "The contrast between Marta's inner state and the ordinary scene around her serves to..."
- "The contrast between the narrator's claims and his reported actions..."

Also "juxtaposes," "foil," "In contrast to __, __." Skill 1.C, 3.D.

Method

1. Name both sides of the contrast in a phrase each.
2. Ask what the **juxtaposition** reveals that neither side shows alone.
3. The key names the effect: heightens a feeling, exposes a gap, reveals a character.
4. Reject choices that restate only one side.

Distractor patterns

- *One side only.*
- *Invented contrast.*
- *Wrong effect.*

Worked example (Passage A, lines 9-10 and 13-17)

The contrast between the ordinary details of lines 9-10 and Marta's feelings in lines 13-17 primarily serves to (A) show that the landing is a happy place (B) heighten the sense that Marta's inner disturbance is private and unseen by those around her (C) suggest that the boy and the gull are aware of her distress (D) demonstrate that Marta has no emotions

Step 1: sides: the boy, gull, sandwich (ordinary, indifferent) versus the lurching, mortifying inner state. Step 2: the juxtaposition isolates her. Step 3: (A) reads only one side. (C) personifies. (D) is a contradiction. **(B)**.

Practice

P21. (Passage D) The contrast between the narrator's grand opening and the domestic scene that follows primarily creates (A) a serious tone of social concern (B) comic deflation, as a sweeping claim gives way to a trivial marital exchange (C) a sense of suspense (D) nostalgia

P22. (Passage B) The contrast between "I bear my brother no ill will" (line 1) and the detailed account of Edmund's actions (lines 5-15) primarily serves to (A) show that the narrator has forgiven Edmund (B) reveal a gap between the narrator's self-presentation and his preoccupation (C) prove that Edmund is guilty (D) emphasize the narrator's modesty

Type 12: Student-claim items (literary argumentation)

What it looks like

- "A student is writing an essay arguing that the narrator of Passage B is unaware of his own envy. Which of the following would best support this claim?"
- "Which of the following claims about Passage A is most defensible?"

Also "Which thesis best responds to the prompt...", "Which sentence best explains how the evidence supports the claim?" Skill 7.A-7.D. These make up 10-13 percent of Section I.

Method

1. Underline the **key terms** of the claim. The evidence must support those terms.
2. For "best supports": test each quotation. Does it, by itself, show the claim? Topic-related is not enough.
3. For "most defensible": choose the claim you can prove from the lines, in measured language, about meaning rather than devices.
4. For "best explains how the evidence supports": the key names a specific feature of the quoted language and connects it to the claim.
5. For thesis items: the key makes an interpretive claim, not a restatement of the prompt or a list of devices.

Distractor patterns

- *Related but not supporting.*
- *Paraphrase as commentary.*
- *Prompt restated as thesis.*
- *Device list as thesis.*
- *Overclaim.*

Worked example (Passage B)

A student is writing an essay arguing that the narrator's insistence on his own fairness is undermined by the specific details he chooses to report. Which of the following quotations best supports the claim? (A) "The watch is a handsome object, I am told." (line 4) (B) "It has been said in town that Edmund has not wound it once since the funeral" (lines 6-7) (C) "Mother says I am too hard on him." (lines 8-9) (D) "Father used to say" (line 10)

Step 1: key terms: "insistence on fairness," "undermined," "details he chooses to report." The evidence must show him reporting a damaging detail while claiming neutrality. Step 2: (A) is a pose of indifference, not a damaging detail. (C) reports another's view, not his choice of detail. (D) is an attribution. **(B)** is a detail he volunteers that tracks Edmund's behavior, followed by the denial "not because I have been keeping track."

Practice

P23. (Passage C) Which of the following claims about the passage is most defensible? (A) The passage proves that Dora does not love her son. (B) The characters use evasion and routine remarks to manage feelings they cannot say aloud. (C) The passage is mainly about hospital procedure. (D) The Nurse is the antagonist.

P24. (Passage A) A student claims that Marta's staging of her luggage reveals a conflict between her wish to appear untroubled and her actual unease. Which sentence best explains how lines 3-4 ("like the luggage of a woman with nothing to hide") support the claim? (A) The line describes luggage that is neatly arranged. (B) By saying the luggage should look like that of a woman "with nothing to hide," the narrator implies Marta is performing innocence, which suggests she does have something to hide or fears being seen as if she did. (C) The line shows Marta likes to be early. (D) The line proves that Marta is leaving because of a crime.

Format A: EXCEPT and NOT

What it looks like

- "The narrator mentions all of the following about Marta EXCEPT..."
- "All of the following are true of Dora EXCEPT..."

Method

1. Circle EXCEPT or NOT. Tell yourself: "Three are true; find the false one."
2. Check each choice T or F against specific lines; do not stop at the first true one.
3. The key is often plausible but absent.

Worked example (Passage A)

The narrator mentions all of the following about Marta EXCEPT that she (A) arrived early at the landing (B) packed a hat in her hatbox (C) has lived in the town for thirty-one years (D) intends to write to her sister
T/F: (A) lines 1-2: True. (B) the hatbox "held no hat": False. (C) lines 7-9: True. (D) lines 17-18: True. **(B).**

Practice

P25. (Passage C) All of the following are true of the scene EXCEPT (A) Tomas is wearing his coat (B) Dora corrects her collar (C) the Nurse speaks the name of the person she is looking for (D) Dora mentions her husband

Format B: I, II, III

What it looks like

- “Which of the following does the dialogue in Passage D suggest about Mr. Bennet? I. He is aware of his wife’s eagerness. II. He enjoys teasing her. III. He is deeply hurt by her. (A) I only (B) I and II only (C) II and III only (D) I, II, and III”

Method

1. Judge each statement T or F independently.
2. Match your pattern to a letter.
3. Typically one statement is clearly false; find it first.

Worked example (Passage D)

*Which of the following does the dialogue suggest about Mr. Bennet? I. He is aware of his wife’s eagerness. II. He enjoys teasing her. III. He is deeply hurt by her. I: “You want to tell me”: True. II: his “no answer” and dry reply tease her: True. III: nothing shows hurt: False. Pattern T, T, F: **(B) I and II only**.*

Practice

P26. (Passage B) Which of the following are true of the narrator? I. He claims to be unconcerned about the watch. II. He reports details that show he watches Edmund’s behavior. III. He admits openly that he envies Edmund. (A) I only (B) I and II only (C) II and III only (D) I, II, and III

Part 3: Test-day checklist

1. Read the header; read the passage once with five-word gists.
2. Mark irony, contrast, repetition, and the turn.
3. Answer line-cited questions first, rereading a sentence either side.
4. Answer whole-passage questions last, using your gists.
5. Predict before you look; eliminate opposite valence and extremes; half right is all wrong.
6. Never leave a blank.

The ten most common ways to miss a prose or drama question

MISTAKE	FIX
Treating an unreliable narrator as reliable	Look for the gap between claims and details
Reading dialogue at face value	Ask what is avoided or implied
Choosing the extreme tone word	Prefer the measured word
Forgetting a character’s complexity	Look for two traits
Choosing the common meaning of a word	Substitute in context
Labeling syntax without effect	Tie the form to the meaning
Missing irony	Name both sides of the gap
Overreading an inference	Point to words that license it
Missing EXCEPT	Circle it; mark each choice T/F

MISTAKE	FIX
Spending too long on one passage	12 minutes; answer line-cited items first

Master Key

ITEM	KEY	EXPLANATION
P1	B	The narration stays close to Marta's perceptions ("she found," "she felt") but comments with irony ("a woman with nothing to hide," "unlovely"); this is third person limited. (A) has no "I"; (C) never enters another mind; (D) includes thoughts and feelings.
P2	B	The narrator repeats a rumor against Edmund while professing disinterest; he wants it heard. (A) and (D) fit neither the denial nor the tracking; (C) reverses the sense.
P3	B	"He liked to be told things" is dry: Dora implies that her husband believed the reassurance he was given and was misled. (A) takes the line as praise; (C) invents anger; (D) is unrelated.
P4	B	"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it" shows he knows what she wants and teases by holding back. (A) misses his engagement; (C) is unsupported; (D) is too extreme.
P5	B	A coat left on signals unreadiness to settle; the small office and late afternoon add pressure. (A) and (C) contradict the tension; (D) is possible but unsupported by "about to leave."
P6	B	Their indifferent routine contrasts with Marta's private tension. (A) and (C) are unsupported; (D) overreads.
P7	B	Her impatience against his restraint produces the dry comedy typical of the exchange. (A) and (C) misread; (D) invents isolation.

ITEM	KEY	EXPLANATION
P8	B	The Nurse's failure to say either name is a quiet source of tension and impersonality. (A) is not shown; (C) is not hostile; (D) is not supported.
P9	B	"No ill will," "merely accurate," "which proves only" show defensiveness and subtle spite. (A) fits neither; (C) has no affection; (D) ignores the pressure behind the words.
P10	B	The grand statement about fortune and wives is delivered with an arch smile at social assumptions. (A) takes it earnestly; (C) and (D) are unsupported.
P11	B	The narrator turns his criticism into a principle ("courtesy we owe the truth") so that spite looks like accuracy. (A) misreads the tone; (C) and (D) are unsupported.
P12	B	"Unlovely" gives the scene a plain, unglamorous quality that matches Marta's flat mood. (A), (C), and (D) overreach or reverse.
P13	B	The short sentence restores outward composure after the lurch. (A), (C), and (D) are unsupported.
P14	B	The formal, sweeping structure ("a truth universally acknowledged") sounds like a law of nature while expressing a social assumption. (A) is the literal reading; (C) and (D) are false.
P15	B	The narrator's meticulous attention is itself the hardness he denies. (A) invents an admission; (C) is irrelevant; (D) misses that the irony is unintended.
P16	B	A casual remark makes her feel exposed though no one suspects. (A) and (D) are unsupported; (C) is false.

ITEM	KEY	EXPLANATION
P17	A	The passage opens with a claim of goodwill and then supplies details that undercut it. (B) is only half chronological; (C) and (D) are false.
P18	B	Tomas's request is the moment feeling surfaces; "Fine" covers it again. (A) and (C) overstate; (D) is unsupported.
P19	B	The early arrival, the staging, the apologies in the letter show preparation and unease. (A) and (D) conflict with the preparation; (C) is unsupported.
P20	B	He interprets disconfirming evidence as further proof. (A) and (C) are opposite; (D) is wrong valence.
P21	B	A sweeping claim gives way to a trivial marital exchange; the deflation is comic. (A), (C), and (D) are mismatched in tone.
P22	B	His claim of no ill will is contradicted by his preoccupation. (A) and (D) accept the claim; (C) overreaches.
P23	B	Evasion and routine remarks ("Fine," "making conversation") manage unspoken feeling. (A) overclaims; (C) and (D) misread.
P24	B	The line implies Marta is performing innocence, which suggests something to hide. (A) and (C) are not evidence of the claimed conflict; (D) overreaches.
P25	C	The Nurse "does not say either name" (lines 15-16), so (C) is false; the others are shown.
P26	B	I and II hold; III is false because he never admits envy.

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

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