



SCHOLAR COACH, INC.

AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

FRQ Mini-Drills: 15-Minute Practice Tasks

Twenty short drills that train the skills behind the three essays: finding the shift, writing a defensible thesis, building commentary, planning Question 3, and adding sophistication. Each takes about 15 minutes or less. Write your own answer first, then compare it with the model.

How to use this document. Do one or two drills a day. Do not copy the models. Compare them with your work, ask what the model did that you did not, and rewrite once.

Part 1: Find the shift (Drills 1–4)

A shift is a change in tone, subject, time, speaker, or perspective. Mark where it happens, name what changes, and say what the change reveals.

Drill 1. Shakespeare, Sonnet 29: "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, / I all alone beweep my outcast state... 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." Where is the shift, and what changes?

Drill 2. Rossetti, "Remember": the speaker asks to be remembered, then says "Yet if you should forget me for a while / And afterwards remember, do not grieve." Where is the shift, and what does it reveal about the speaker?

Drill 3. Frost, "Nothing Gold Can Stay": "Nature's first green is gold... So Eden sank to grief, / So dawn goes down to day. / Nothing gold can stay." Identify the move from particular to general.

Drill 4. Shelley, "Ozymandias": the final two lines describe "The lone and level sands stretch far away." How does this image change the meaning of the inscription that comes before it?

Part 2: Thesis drills (Drills 5–9)

A strong thesis offers a defensible *interpretation* that responds to the prompt. It is not a statement of the obvious, a plot summary, or a list of devices. A good shape is: *Although [surface reading], [writer] [does something through specific techniques] to suggest [a larger meaning]*. Write a one- or two-sentence thesis for each prompt.

Drill 5. Dickinson, "Hope is the thing with feathers": analyze how Dickinson uses literary elements and techniques to convey a complex understanding of hope.

Drill 6. Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask": analyze how Dunbar uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speakers' experience of concealment.

Drill 7. Austen, the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*: analyze how Austen uses literary elements and techniques to characterize the society she depicts.

Drill 8. Chopin, "The Story of an Hour": analyze how Chopin uses literary elements and techniques to portray Louise Mallard's unexpected response to her husband's death.

Drill 9 (Question 3). A work in which a character keeps a secret. Choose a work you know and write a thesis about how the secret contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.

Part 3: Commentary drills (Drills 10–13)

Commentary explains *how* evidence supports the claim. Weak commentary restates the quotation ("This shows that the speaker is sad"). Strong commentary names what the detail does and what it suggests. For each item, write **three sentences** that connect the evidence to the claim.

Drill 10. *Claim:* Dickinson makes hope small and tender. *Evidence:* She calls hope "the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul."

Drill 11. *Claim:* Dunbar presents the mask as a burden. *Evidence:* "With torn and bleeding hearts we smile."

Drill 12. *Claim:* Austen's narrator is ironic. *Evidence:* She calls a social assumption "a truth universally acknowledged."

Drill 13. *Claim:* Shelley uses Ozymandias's inscription ironically. *Evidence:* The pedestal reads, "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" while only sand surrounds it.

Part 4: Question 3 mental-map drills (Drills 14–17)

Question 3 rewards a work you know well enough to use as evidence. Practice turning one work into material for several prompts.

Drill 14. Choose a novel or play. In 10 minutes, list: (a) three central conflicts, (b) three important scenes, (c) two symbols or motifs, (d) the narrative structure.

Drill 15. For the same work, write a one-sentence thesis for the prompt "a character who is in conflict with society."

Drill 16. For the same work, write a one-sentence thesis for the prompt "a setting that shapes a character."

Drill 17. For the same work, write a one-sentence thesis for the prompt "a moment of moral ambiguity."

Part 5: Sophistication drills (Drills 18–20)

The sophistication point goes to a *sustained* move: exploring a tension or contradiction, placing the interpretation in a broader context, considering an alternative interpretation, or using an especially effective style. A single sentence does not earn it. For each drill, write a short paragraph (4–6 sentences).

Drill 18 (Tension). Write a paragraph on "Hope is the thing with feathers" that explores how hope is both fragile and unbreakable.

Drill 19 (Alternative interpretation). Write a paragraph on “Ozymandias” that considers a reading in which the poem admires the sculptor rather than mocking the king, and explains why the primary reading still holds.

Drill 20 (Broader context). Write a paragraph on Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay” that connects the poem’s treatment of loss to the biblical story it alludes to, and shows how that allusion deepens the poem.

Model Answers

Drill 1. The shift comes at “Yet” in line 9. Before it, the speaker is despairing and envious of others; after it, a thought of the beloved lifts him, and the simile of the lark rising at dawn transforms his gloom into joy. The shift shows that the speaker’s worth is restored not by changing his circumstances but by remembering love.

Drill 2. The shift is at line 9 (“Yet if you should forget me”). The poem moves from a request to be remembered to a release from that request. It reveals that the speaker values the beloved’s happiness above her own remembrance, which deepens the poem’s tenderness.

Drill 3. The poem moves from a specific image (spring’s first leaf) to universal examples (Eden, the dawn) and finally to a general law in the last line. The widening scale makes a small observation feel like a truth about all beauty.

Drill 4. The vast, empty sands undercut the inscription. The king’s command to “despair” at his works is answered by a landscape in which nothing remains, so the boundless desert becomes the true monument and the last word belongs to time.

Drill 5. Dickinson presents hope as both fragile and unbreakable: through an extended bird metaphor, a movement from general description to personal testimony, and a final claim that hope asks “a crumb” of no one, she suggests that the smallest comfort can prove the most durable.

Drill 6. Through the central metaphor of the mask, the repeated refrain, and a shift from description to prayer-like cry, Dunbar suggests that concealment is not a choice but a cost imposed by a hostile world, one the speakers bear in silence.

Drill 7. Austen characterizes her society as one that dresses economic ambition in the language of universal truth, using inflated diction, commercial vocabulary, and a delayed, mock-serious sentence to expose the gap between what it claims and what it wants.

Drill 8. Chopin portrays Louise Mallard’s response as a sudden, shocking sense of freedom, using the imagery of the open window and the sky to suggest that grief and liberation can arise at once, and that her marriage had confined her more than she had admitted.

Drill 9 (sample: *Frankenstein*). In *Frankenstein*, Victor’s silence about his creation turns a scientific act into a moral failure, suggesting that the greatest harm comes not from ambition alone but from the refusal to take responsibility for its consequences.

Drill 10 (model commentary). The metaphor makes an abstract feeling small, alive, and approachable, so hope seems less like a grand force than a creature that shares a person’s body. By placing the bird “in the soul,” Dickinson locates hope within the self rather than in the world, which is why storms cannot easily take it. The tenderness of the image sets up the poem’s later claim that this small thing is also durable.

Drill 11 (model commentary). The phrase places the physical language of injury (“torn and bleeding”) beside the cheerful word “smile,” so the reader feels the gap between the face the speakers show and the pain they carry. The contrast makes concealment seem less like a disguise and more like a wound. Dunbar thereby presents the mask as a burden borne at real cost.

Drill 12 (model commentary). The inflated phrase “a truth universally acknowledged” promises a grand principle and delivers an ordinary social assumption, so the gap between tone and content is the joke. The narrator stands above the assumption, inviting the reader to doubt it. Austen thus establishes the ironic stance she will maintain across the novel.

Drill 13 (model commentary). The inscription speaks as though the king’s works still command awe, but the reader sees only sand. The distance between what the words claim and what the scene shows turns the boast into mockery. Shelley lets the setting contradict the king, so the irony is delivered without comment.

Drill 14 (sample: *Frankenstein*). *Conflicts:* creator versus creation; ambition versus responsibility; individual versus society. *Scenes:* the creation; Justine’s trial; the pursuit across the Arctic. *Symbols:* fire and light; the Arctic. *Structure:* a frame narrative with three narrators (Walton, Victor, the creature).

Drill 15. In *Frankenstein*, the creature’s rejection by every human he meets shows how a society’s judgment can create the very monstrosity it fears.

Drill 16. In *Frankenstein*, the Arctic setting mirrors Victor’s isolation, suggesting that his ambition has carried him beyond human community.

Drill 17. In *Frankenstein*, the creature’s account of his suffering complicates the reader’s judgment of him, so the novel resists any simple division between victim and villain.

Drill 18 (model paragraph). Dickinson’s bird is “little,” and the poem never lets us forget its fragility: it can be abashed, it needs a storm to test it, and it must be heard in a gale. Yet the poem also insists that the bird “never stops.” The tension is deliberate. By making hope small and unbreakable at once, Dickinson suggests that endurance does not require strength; the quietest comfort may outlast every force that tries to silence it.

Drill 19 (model paragraph). A reader might argue that the poem admires the sculptor, since he “well those passions read” and carved them so that they “yet survive.” On this view, art outlasts power. That reading deserves weight, but the final image weakens it: the statue is itself a “colossal Wreck,” and nothing remains of the king’s world. The sculptor’s skill survives only as ruin, so the poem’s deepest claim is not that art triumphs over time but that time reduces everything, king and craftsman alike, to sand.

Drill 20 (model paragraph). Frost’s allusion to Eden gives the poem a larger story. The speaker begins with the small loss of a leaf’s golden stage, but “So Eden sank to grief” casts that loss as a version of humanity’s first fall. The allusion suggests that loss is not an accident in the natural world but part of the pattern of all beginnings. It also changes the tone: what might have been wistful becomes quietly tragic, because the poem treats every spring as a repetition of an ancient departure.

Self-check rubric for thesis drills

QUESTION	YES / NO
Does it offer an interpretation instead of restating the prompt or the plot?	

QUESTION	YES / NO
Is it defensible (a reasonable reader could disagree)?	
Does it name how the techniques build the meaning?	
Is it one or two sentences?	

If you answer “no” to any item, rewrite the thesis once before moving on.

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

BOOK NOW →