

How to Write an AP Literature Prose Essay Guide

First Step: Read the Prompt (2 Minutes)

1. Read the prompt carefully, underlining every part of the task.
2. Pay special attention to the specific literary elements (Imagery, Characterization, Narration, etc.) the prompt asks you to analyze; the prompt very often points you in the right direction as far as which literary elements are the most relevant!
3. The prompt implores readers to consider some deeper meaning of the poem, such as an assertion made about humanity, sin and transgression, friendship, etc.
4. Once you have this general frame of reference, your job is two-fold:
5. Elaborate on the theme presented in the prompt.
6. Add depth by making it more specific and pointed
7. It is superficial to simply say that a poem "discusses sin and transgression."
8. Rather, evoke your analytical skills and make a more specific assertion about sin and transgression
9. Perhaps that the sins of one's past haunt one into adulthood, or something like that.
10. The bottom line is, don't take the prompt at face-value!
11. Reread the prompt to ensure understanding before moving on to the prose itself. Keep the theme and techniques presented by the prompt in mind as you read.

Second Step: Reading the Prose (8 Minutes)

1. Read the title and any historical background before starting.
2. Consider how the historical context influences the wider meaning of the work as a whole.
3. A poem published in the 1920s, for example, may be influenced by the post-WWI societal fragmentation evident in works such as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.
4. A piece of prose published in the 1960s may have some red-scare elements.
5. It would behoove you to review general historical time period/developments before the exam!
6. Read the prose all the way through once. This reading is simply for general UNDERSTANDING of the passage, so read it fluidly and quickly.
7. Do not stop at challenging words or phrases, taking minutes at a time to decipher confusing lines. Such an arduous process is simply too time consuming.
8. For this first reading, you want a basic understanding....
9. What is the setting? Who's narrating? What's the basic theme expressed? General mood/tone words? Any interesting/bizarre characters? Which literary elements jump out at you?
10. Now, read the prose a second time, this time with greater scrutiny. Keep literary elements in mind. In prose, the elements to watch out for are...
--Imagery, Visual, Tactile, Gustatory, Olfactory, Auditory, Symbolism / Symbolic Action, Figurative Language, Hyperbole, Litotes/other forms of understatement, Metonymy / Synecdoche, Metaphor, Simile, Setting
11. How is the setting portrayed? What type of *mood* does the description of the setting evoke? What types of words and images are used to establish setting? Think *Mayor of Casterbridge* and *As I Lay Dying*...both of these settings are built through lots of descriptive language and imagery. Is this the case in your prose?
12. Narration
13. *Who* is narrating the story? Does the narrator's perspective color the reader's interpretation of events?
14. Is the narration omniscient? limited omniscient? first, second, third person? How may these different types of narration influence our perception of the prose?
15. Syntax
16. Are the sentences curt and choppy? Long and grandiloquent? Heavily or sparsely punctuated? Any humor in the writing? How may these writing styles reflect the themes of the work, or impact the reader's interpretation?
17. Also note changes in syntax, as they often illicit changes in mood and thus indicate pivotal points of a story.
18. Diction

19. Don't go "diction" happy, labeling everything that has to do with words as diction. If a city, for example, is described by the words "dirty, degraded, gray, overcast, deserted," and other negative words, it is not correct to assert that "the author uses negative diction to describe the city as a lonely, depressing place." This is not diction. Simply choosing certain words to facilitate a description is not diction.
20. Rather, diction has to do more with the overall *style* of the writing. Does the author use colloquialisms, or is the writing formal and lofty? Is there a particular dialect used to enhance characterization or setting description? Is the writing pedantic, or lazy and informal? Is a particular lexicon used, or childish language perhaps?
21. Irony
22. Is there a difference between the literal meaning of the words on the page, and the implied, or actual meaning?
23. Do we know more than the speaker in the story? (Dramatic Irony)
24. Do situations turn out differently than we and most people would expect?
25. Is a character the victim of fate? (cosmic irony/irony of fate)
26. Tone, Theme, Mood
27. These are separate from the other literary elements because they are "bigger picture" elements.
- They don't fall into the "how" portion of analysis, but rather, they fall into the "what" portion of analysis. A theme is conveyed *through* some other literary element, or, the "what" is conveyed through the "how." It is awkward to say "the overall meaning is conveyed/captured/demonstrated by the theme of..." Mood and tone are the same way.
 - These elements do not stand alone, but rather, are built through the combined effects of other literary elements.
28. With so much to think about while reading, it is necessary to *mark up your paper--annotate!* Underline important lines. Make notes in the margins. Write down whatever arbitrary thoughts come to mind somewhere on your sheet. Point out literary elements when you see them. This will help organize your thoughts and will provide a great springboard for essay writing.
29. Once you've read through the prose a second time, you should have a more thorough understanding of the most important literary elements for this piece of prose. You're ready to write your essay.
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Recommended Prose Essay Format

Introduction (5 Minutes)

- Begin the introduction with a detailed and engaging first sentence.
- For example: Why say something like "Kate Chopin was a feminist who wrote about the subjugation of women in her novel *The Awakening*." when you can write something like... "Just as the ball and chain of misogyny and subjugation seemed most snugly fit around the ankles of American women, Louisiana-born Kate Chopin published a novel that would revolutionize gender relations, empower generations of feminists, and tear the social status quo asunder..."
- In other words, give your writing some flair, some of your own unique style. This hopefully will captivate your reader and keep them hooked.
- Use the introduction to address the "What" and "How" of the prompt.
- Write a clear and well-stated sentence that explains the "What" of the prose and introduce the techniques that are used to explain the How of the prompt.

Body (1-4 paragraphs)

- There are two general organizational formats one could follow when writing body paragraph
- Sort paragraphs by literary technique
- Flow chronologically through the poem. Perhaps one paragraph on the beginning, one on the middle, one on the end of the prose.

- Make sure you begin each paragraph with a strong introductory sentence. The introduction should outline exactly what that paragraph will prove! It should therefore reveal something about the larger meaning of the prose, the theme you are attempting to analyze, and the literary element through which that theme is demonstrated.
- Introduce the “WHAT” (thesis/ theme) of the essay.
- Support the theme/ thesis with literary elements- (imagery, personification, symbols...)
- Provide examples to back up the “WHAT”- at-least 3-4 examples. These examples could be direct quotes from the prose, weaved seamlessly into the body paragraph.
- Explain how the examples relate to the “WHAT” in detail.
- Restate the thesis or topic sentence (rephrase).
- **Make sure the body answers the prompt!**
- Don’t repeat the same ideas. Say it once and move on.
- Use better vocabulary.
- In particular, use apt vocabulary in two ways:
 - There are many different verbs you could use when describing how an author uses certain literary techniques and how that technique contributes to a theme. Instead of saying "the author uses," for example, one could say that the author...employs, utilizes, depends on, makes frequent use of, relies on, affords insight through, displays apt command of, shows a capacity for, and many other phrases.
 - Strong vocabulary is also necessary for tone/mood words. I need not say that words such as "mad, sad, happy, jealous" are detrimental to an essay. It is impossible to provide a complete list of "good" tone/mood words, so just think of the *exact* mood you're looking for? There are better and more specific words out there, you just have to think about why a character feels a certain way or why the author created such a mood, and a better word may come to mind.
 - Sardonic, for example, is a more effective and more specific word than "sarcastic." Melancholy > Sad. Grisly > sad/mad. Ominous/Foreboding > scary. Vitriolic > harsh. You get the idea. For a more comprehensive list of mood/tone words, check the link in AP Must-haves.
 - Moods may also be created by the intermingling of two different emotions. Consider, for example, the difference between *fond reminiscence* and *bitter remembrance*. Both may seem the same on paper, since they both involve a character looking back on the past, but these two moods are actually very different. A mood may also be one of, let’s say, welcomed acquiescence, such as the act of succumbing to a formidable opponent after a long, gruesome battle. Think of *My Papa's Waltz*. That piece was not completely ominous, though the subject matter was a bit frightening. Rather, Roethke made it a bit lighter, more playful and loving, with a tinge of danger. If that's what you feel, then say it! Rather than choosing one mood, say something like "The mood is one of elevating danger offset by playful banter."
 - Mature analysis of mood, theme, and tone therefore requires strong mood/tone vocabulary and close reading.

Conclusion (3-5 minutes)

- The conclusion should just be summing up what you wrote and bringing your essay to a close
- Do **not** introduce any new ideas
- Restate and stress the importance of your thesis
- You may echo (ECHO, not repeat!) the intro and bring the reader full circle
- It is very important to have a conclusion to bring a sense of completeness to your essay, **so if you are pressed for time it isn't too important to make it fancy, just make sure you have one!**