



# How to Approach the Multiple-Choice Questions on the AP English Literature Exam

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## Introduction to the Multiple-Choice Section of the Exam

Multiple choice? Multiple guess? Multiple anxiety? The day after the exam students often bemoan the difficulties and uncertainties of Section I of the AP Literature exam.

“It’s unfair.”

“It’s crazy.”

“Was that in English?”

“Did you get four Ds in a row for the second poem?”

“I just closed my eyes and pointed.”

Is it really possible to avoid these and other exam woes? We hope that by following along with us in this chapter you will begin to feel a bit more familiar with the world of multiple-choice questions and, thus, become a little more comfortable with the multiple-choice section of the exam.

## What is it about the multiple-choice questions that causes such anxiety?

Basically, a multiple-choice literature question is a flawed method of gauging understanding because, by its very nature, it forces you to play a cat-and-mouse game with the test maker who demands that you concentrate on items that are incorrect before you can choose what is correct. We know, however, that complex literature has a richness that allows for ambiguity. When you are taking the exam, you are expected to match someone else’s take on a work with the answers you choose. This is what often causes the student to feel that the multiple-choice section is unfair. And maybe, to a degree, it is. However, the test is designed to allow you to shine, not to be humiliated. To that end, you will not find “cutesy” questions, and the test writers will not play games with you. What they will do is to present several valid options as a response to a challenging and appropriate question. These questions are designed to separate the perceptive and thoughtful reader from the superficial and impulsive one.

This said, it’s wise to develop a strategy for success. Practice is the key to this success. You’ve been

confronted with all types of multiple-choice questions during your career as a student. The test-taking skills you have learned in your social studies, math, and science classes may also apply to the AP Literature exam.

## What should I expect in Section I?

For this first section of the AP Literature exam, you are allotted 1 hour to answer between 45 and 60 objective questions on four or five prose and poetry selections. The prose passages may come from works of fiction, or nonfiction, or drama. You can expect the poems to be complete and from different time periods and of different styles and forms. In other words, you will not find two Shakespearean sonnets on the same exam.

These are not easy readings. They are representative of the college-level work you have been doing throughout the year. You will be expected to

- Follow sophisticated syntax
- Respond to diction
- Be comfortable with upper-level vocabulary
- Be familiar with literary terminology
- Make inferences
- Be sensitive to irony and tone
- Recognize components of style

The good news is that the selection is self-contained. This means that if it is about the Irish Potato Famine, you will not be at a disadvantage if you know nothing about it prior to the exam. Frequently there will be biblical references in a selection. This is especially true of works from an earlier time period. You are expected to be aware of basic allusions to biblical and mythological works often found in literature, but the passage will never require you to have any specific religious background.

*Do not let the subject matter of a passage throw you. Strong analytical skills will work on any passage.*

## How should I begin to work with Section I?

Take no more than a minute and thumb through the exam, looking for the following:

- The length of the selections
- The time periods or writing styles, if you can recognize them
- The number of questions asked

- A quick idea of the type of questions

This brief skimming of the test will put your mind into gear because you will be aware of what is expected of you.

## How should I proceed through this section of the exam?

Timing is important. Always maintain an awareness of the time. Wear a watch. (Some students like to put it directly in front of them on the desk.) Remember, this will not be your first encounter with the multiple-choice section of the test. You've probably been practicing timed exams in class; in addition, this book provides you with three timed experiences. We're sure you will notice improvements as you progress through the timed practice activities.

Although the test naturally breaks into 15 minute sections, you may take less or more time on a particular passage, but you must know when to move on. The test does not become more difficult as it progresses. So, you will want to give yourself adequate opportunity to answer each set of questions.

Work at a pace of about one question per minute. Every question is worth the same number of points, so don't get bogged down on those that involve multiple tasks. Don't panic if a question is beyond you. Remember, it will probably be beyond a great number of other students as well. There has to be a bar that determines the 5's and 4's for this exam. Just do your best.

Reading the text carefully is a must. Begin at the beginning and work your way through. Do not waste time reading questions before you read the selection.

Most people read just with their eyes. We want you to slow down and read with your senses of sight, sound, and touch.

- Underline, circle, bracket, or highlight the text.
- Read closely, paying attention to punctuation and rhythms of the lines or sentences.
- Read as if you were reading the passage aloud to an audience emphasizing meaning and intent.
- As corny as it may seem, hear those words in your head.
- This technique may seem childish, but it works. Using your finger as a pointer, underscore the line as you are reading it aloud in your head. This forces you to slow down and to really notice the text. This will be helpful when you have to refer to the passage.
- Use all the information given to you about the passage, such as title, author, date of publication, and footnotes.
- Be aware of foreshadowing.
- Be aware of thematic lines and be sensitive to details that will obviously be material for multiple-choice questions.

- When reading poetry, pay particular attention to enjambment and end-stopped lines because they carry meaning.
- With poetry, it's often helpful to paraphrase a stanza, especially if the order of the lines has been inverted.

**Tips:**

You can practice these techniques any time. Take any work and read it aloud. Time yourself. A good rate is about 1 1/2 minutes per page.

## Types of Multiple-Choice Questions

Multiple-choice questions are not written randomly. There are certain formats you will encounter. The answers to the following questions should clarify some of the patterns.

### Is the structure the same for all of the multiple-choice questions?

No. Here are several basic patterns that the AP test makers often employ:

**1. The straightforward question**, such as:

- The poem is an example of a

C. lyric

- The word "smooth" refers to

B. his skin

**2. The question that refers you to specific lines and asks you to draw a conclusion or to interpret.**

- Lines 52–57 serve to

A. reinforce the author's thesis

**3. The "all . . . except" question** requires extra time because it demands that you consider every possibility.

- The AP Literature exam is all of the following except:

A. It is given in May of each year.

- B. It is open to high school seniors.
- C. It is published in The New York Times.
- D. It is used as a qualifier for college credit.
- E. It is a 3-hour test.

**4. The question that asks you to make an inference or to abstract a concept that is not directly stated in the passage.**

- In the poem “My Last Duchess,” the reader can infer that the speaker is

E. arrogant

5. Here is the killer question. It uses Roman Numerals, no less! The question employing Roman numerals is problematic and time-consuming. You can be certain that each exam will have several of these questions.

- In the poem, “night” refers to

I. the death of the maiden

II. a pun on Sir Lancelot’s title

III. the end of the affair

A. I only

B. I and II

C. I and III

D. II and III

E. I, II, and III

This is the type of question to skip if it causes you problems and/or you are short on time. Remember, it will cost you a quarter of a point if you are wrong and 0 if you skip it.

## **What kinds of questions should I expect on the exam?**

The multiple-choice questions center around form and content. The test makers want to assess your understanding of the meaning of the selection as well as your ability to draw inferences and perceive implications based on it. They also want to know whether you understand how a writer develops his or her ideas.

The questions, therefore, will be factual, technical, analytical, and inferential. The two tables that follow

illustrate the types of key words and phrases in these four categories that you can expect to find in questions for both the prose and poetry selections.

Note: Do not memorize these tables. Also, do not panic if a word or phrase is unfamiliar to you. You may or may not encounter any or all of these words or phrases on any given exam. You can, however, count on meeting up with many of these in the practice exams in this book.

## Prose: Key Words and Phrases Found in Multiple-Choice Question

<b>Factual</b>	<b>Technical</b>	<b>Analytical</b>	<b>Inferential</b>
words refer to	sentence structure	rhetorical strategy	effect of diction
allusions	style	shift in development	tone
antecedents	grammatical purpose	rhetorical stance	inferences
pronoun referents	dominant technique	style	effect of last paragraph
genre	imagery	metaphor	effect on reader
setting	point of view	contrast	narrator's attitude
	organization of passage	comparison	image suggests
	narrative progress of passage	cause/effect	effect of detail
	conflict	argument	author implies
	irony	description	author most concerned with
	function of	narration	symbol
		specific-general	
		how something is characterized	
		imagery	
		passage is primarily concerned with	
		function of	

## Poetry: Key Words and Phrases Found in Multiple-Choice Questions

Factual	Technical	Analytical	Inferential
all except	imagery	character portrayal	mood
definition	literary devices	imagery	attitude of
thesis	paradox	literary devices	poet's attitude
sequence of events	organizational pattern	paradox	purpose of
the object of _____ is _____	syntax	purpose of	tone of the poem
allusion	metrics	rhetorical shifts	theme of the poem
the subject of dramatic situation	parallel structure	ironies presented	reader may infer
paraphrasing	rhetorical shifts	lest important	best interpreted as
subject	ironies presented	most important	effect of diction
references	function of diction		speaker implies
	dramatic moment		_____ is associated with _____
	meaning conveyed by		context
			symbol

**A word about jargon.** Jargon refers to words that are unique to a specific subject. A common language is important for communication, and there must be agreement on the basic meanings of terms. Even though it is important to know the universal language of a subject, it is also important that you not limit the scope of your thinking to a brief definition. All the terms used in the tables are interwoven in literature. They are categorized only for easy reference. They also work in many other contexts. In other words, think beyond the box.

## Scoring the Multiple-Choice Section

### How does the scoring of the multiple-choice section work?

The College Board has implemented a new scoring process for the multiple-choice section of the AP

English Literature and Composition exam. No longer are points deducted for incorrect responses so there is no longer a penalty for guessing incorrectly. Therefore, it is to your advantage to answer ALL of the multiple-choice questions. Your chances of guessing the correct answer improve if you skillfully apply the process of elimination to narrow the choices.

**Multiple-choice scores are based solely on the number of questions answered correctly.** If you answered 36 questions correctly, then your raw score is 36. This raw score, which is 45 percent of the total, is combined with that of the essay section to make up a composite score. This is then manipulated to form a scale on which the final AP grade is based.

## Strategies for Answering the Multiple-Choice Questions

You've been answering multiple-choice questions most of your academic life, and you've probably figured out ways to deal with them. However, there may be some points you have not considered that will be helpful for this particular exam.

### General Guidelines

- Work in order. This is a good approach for several reasons:
  - It's clear.
  - You will not lose your place on the scan sheet.
  - There may be a logic to working sequentially that will help you answer previous questions. But, this is your call. If you are more comfortable moving around the exam, do so.
- Write on the exam booklet. Mark it up. Make it yours. Interact with the test.
- Do not spend too much time on any one question.
- Focus on your strengths. If you are more comfortable working with poetry, answer the poetry questions first.
- Don't be misled by the length or appearance of a selection. There is no correlation between length or appearance and the difficulty of the questions.
- Don't fight the question or the passage. You may know other information about the subject of the text or a question. It's irrelevant. Work within the given context.
- Consider all the choices in a given question. This will keep you from jumping to a false conclusion. It helps you to slow down and to really look at each possibility. You may find that your first choice is not the best or most appropriate one.
- Maintain an open mind as you answer subsequent questions in a series. Sometimes the answer to a later question will contradict your answer to a previous one. Reconsider both answers. Also, the phrasing of a question may point to an answer in a previous question.



- Remember that all parts of an answer must be correct.
- When in doubt, go to the text.

### **Specific Techniques**

- Process of elimination: This is your primary tool, except for direct knowledge of the answer.

1. Read the five choices.
2. If no choice immediately strikes you as correct, you can

- Eliminate those that are obviously wrong
- Eliminate those choices that are too narrow or too broad
- Eliminate illogical choices
- Eliminate answers that are synonymous
- Eliminate answers that cancel each other out

3. If two answers are close, do one or the other of the following:

- Find the one that is general enough to cover all aspects of the question
- Find the one that is limited enough to be the detail the question is looking for

- **Substitution/fill in the blank**

1. Rephrase the question, leaving a blank where the answer should go.
2. Use each of the choices to fill in the blank until you find the one that is the best fit.

- **Using context**

1. Consider the context when the question directs you to specific lines, words, or phrases.
2. Locate the given word, phrase, sentence, or poetic line and read the sentence or line before and after the section of the text to which the question refers. Often this provides the information or clues you need to make your choice.

- **Anticipation:** As you read the passage for the first time, mark any details and ideas that you would ask a question about. You may be able to anticipate the test makers this way.

- **Intuition or the educated guess:** You have a wealth of skills and knowledge in your literary subconscious. A question or a choice may trigger a “remembrance of things past.” This can be the basis for your educated guess. Have the confidence to use the educated guess as a valid technique. Trust your own resources.

## Survival Plan

If time is running out and you haven't finished the fourth selection:

1. Scan the remaining questions and look for:
  - \* The shortest questions
  - \* The questions that direct you to a specific line.
2. Look for specific detail/definition questions.
3. Look for self-contained questions. For example: "The se slid sliently from the shore" is an example of C. alliteration. You do not have to go to the passage to answer this question.

You can't be seriously hurt by making educated guesses based on a careful reading of the selection. Be smart. Understand that you need to come to this exam well prepared. You must have a foundation of knowledge and skills. You cannot guess through the entire exam and expect to do well.

This is not lotto. This book is not about how to "beat the exam." We want to maximize the skills you already have. There is an inherent integrity in this exam and your participation in it. With this in mind, when there is no other direction open to you, it is perfectly fine to make an educated guess.

## Is there anything special I should know about preparing for the prose multiple-choice questions?

After you have finished with the Diagnostic/Master exam, you will be familiar with the format and types of questions asked on the AP Lit exam. However, just practicing answering multiple-choice questions on specific works will not give you a complete understanding of this questioning process. We suggest the following to help you hone your multiple-choice answering skills with prose multiple-choice questions:

- Choose a challenging passage from a full-length prose work.
- Read the selection a couple of times and create several multiple-choice questions about specific sections of the selection.
- Make certain the section is self-contained and complex.
- Choose a dialogue, monologue, introductory setting, set description, stage directions, philosophical passage, significant event, or a moment of conflict.
- Create a variety of question types based on the previous chart.
- Refer to the prose table given earlier in this chapter for suggested language and type.

- Administer your miniquiz to a classmate, study group, or class.
- Evaluate your results.
- Repeat this process through several different full-length works during your preparation for the exam. The works can certainly come from those you are studying in class. Here's what should happen as a result of your using this process:
  - Your expectation level for the selections in the actual test will be more realistic.
  - You will become familiar with the language of multiple-choice questions.
  - Your understanding of the process of choosing answers will be heightened.
  - Questions you write that you find less than satisfactory will trigger your analytical skills as you attempt to figure out "what went wrong."
  - Terminology will become more accurate.
  - Bonus: If you continue to do this work throughout your preparation for the AP exam, you will have created a mental storehouse of literary information. So when you are presented with a prose or free-response essay in Section II, you will have an extra resource at your disposal.

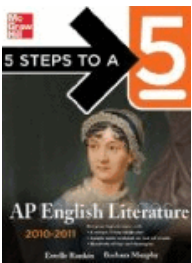
## **Is there anything special I should do to prepare for the poetry questions?**

The points made about prose hold true for the poetry multiple-choice questions as well. But there are a few specific pointers that may prove helpful:

- Choose thoughtful and interesting poems of some length.
- Read the poem several times. Practice reading the poems aloud.
- The greatest benefit will be that as you read any poem, you will automatically begin to respond to areas of the poem that would lend themselves to a multiple-choice question.
- Here is a list of representative poets you may want to read.
  - Shakespeare
  - John Donne
  - Philip Larkin
  - Emily Dickinson
  - Sylvia Plath
  - Dylan Thomas
  - May Swenson
  - Theodore Roethke

- Sharon Olds
- Billy Collins
- Pablo Neruda
- Richard Wilbur
- Adrienne Rich
- Edmund Spenser
- W. H. Auden
- W. B. Yeats
- Gwendolyn Brooks
- Elizabeth Bishop
- Langston Hughes
- Galway Kinnell
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