Chief Reader Report on Student Responses:

2025 AP® English Literature and Composition Set 1

Free-Response Questions

- Number of Students Scored 417,589
- Number of Readers 1,898
- Score Distribution

Exam Score	N	%At
5	67,735	16.2
4	112,395	26.9
3	129,462	31.0
2	66,211	15.9
1	41,786	10.0

- Global Mean 3.46

The following comments on the 2025 free-response questions for AP® English Literature and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Steve Price, Mississippi College, assisted by Exam Leader Kathy Keyes and the following Reading leaders: Question 1, Exam Leaders Adenike Davidson and Kim Windsor and Question Leader Rudy Dela Rosa; Question 2, Exam Leaders Matt Heitzman and Celine Gomez and Question Leader Christine Carson; and Question 3, Exam Leaders Jason Coats and Brenda Buckley-Kuhn and Question Leader Ben Bateman. These comments give an overview of each free-response question and how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student preparation in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

Task: Poetry Analysis
Topic: Colleen McElroy, "Monologue for St. Louis"
Max Score: 6
Mean Score: 3.46

	Max Points:	Mean Score:
Row A: Thesis	1	.93
Row B: Evidence and Commentary	4	2.49
Row C: Sophistication	1	.04

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

For Question 1, the Poetry Analysis question, students were asked to read Colleen McElroy's poem "Monologue for St. Louis" and respond to the following prompt:

> In Colleen McElroy's poem "Monologue for Saint Louis," published in 1980, the speaker returns to her childhood home in St. Louis, Missouri, after an extended absence and contemplates how she has changed. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how McElroy uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker's complex experience of returning home.

In a timed-writing situation and with an unfamiliar text, students were expected to complete three main tasks successfully.

Reading the poem involves more than simply understanding individual words and descriptions. Students were expected to view the text specifically as a poem, recognizing literary elements and techniques in the context of poetry, and then analyze how those techniques are used to shape the poem and its meaning. For example, in "Monologue for Saint Louis," students might identify various literary elements and explore diction (like "choked," "penance," and "stranger"), imagery (like the "crumbling heap of rotting black sticks" or being "in love with words with tart sweet clusters of poems") or symbols (like the "stainless-steel arch"). Students are also likely to notice that the poem has an unusual syntax, without any punctuation, and lacks conventional capitalization, with only "I" being capitalized. Students could also use the structure of the poem to explore the speaker's complex reflection, noticing the shift in line 14 ("now earthworms have trellised the arbor") and the change from past to present. More advanced readers will pay particular attention to the details of the poem, like how the speaker's "cousins sit in their cloaks of black skin" or how the speaker is "in love with words."

Analyzing the poem means taking the relevant elements that students identified in their reading and exploring how the parts function collectively to create meaning in the poem. In "Monologue for Saint Louis," students needed to consider how the parts "convey the speaker's complex experience of returning home." Most readers will recognize that the poem contains elements of both the past and the present. They will recognize that the speaker has positive memories as a child, remembering for instance how she "snitched every summer from the neighbor's arbor succulent pockets of flesh laced with green"; and they will contrast that with the present, how "familiar houses and schoolyards have disappeared" and "childhood streets are blocked with singular black one-way signs." More advanced readers will recognize that the word "complex" is central to the prompt and explore the significance of these shifting and contradictory aspects of the poem. These students might focus on repetition of the word "vow," how family still in Saint Louis "remember each summer how each year I vowed to return home forever," while the conflicted speaker is "lost in a riddle of words" and "home is a vacant lot" where she wrestles with feelings of recognition, guilt, and disorientation.

Students aware of the poem's complexity might also notice the role that race plays as the speaker's Saint Louis family contends with "the shadows of beasts and bad air that infect this flat country."

Writing a well-written response means demonstrating a variety of skills. Students were asked to establish a thesis that shows understanding of the speaker's complex experience of returning home. They build this defensible interpretation with specific, relevant evidence from the poem and through their own commentary that explains the connection between their argument and the evidence. The more successful responses build a line of reasoning that connects ideas and shows the relationships among them. In "Monologue for Saint Louis," students might not only identify the shifting perspective but then connect those ideas by considering the fact that the speaker is "in love with words," especially the "tart sweet" ones found in poetry. Or, students might situate their thesis in the broader context of race, with the more successful writer able to sustain that focus throughout the response (thus earning the sophistication point). A well-written response is more than grammatically correct writing, and it should be noted that students are not expected to write a polished, revised essay in the limited time allotted for the exam.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skill(s) required on this question?

Overall, responses to Free-Response Question 1, Poetry Analysis, were strong, with this being the question students scored highest on this year out of the three responses they wrote. "Monologue for Saint Louis" was an accessible poem, both in language and theme, especially the idea that returning to a place like home, after time, can lead to new perspectives and conflicting emotions. Students generally understood the poem and what it was describing, both literally and figuratively. They recognized that their thesis should be a defensible claim about "the speaker's complex experience of returning home" and constructed appropriate theses. Most responses were full, complete essays, and students had ample thoughts to convey about the speaker's experience returning to Saint Louis. In particular:

- Most students were able to read and understand the narrative of the poem, that the speaker was reflecting on the experience of returning home.
- Most students recognized that the poem was structured with contrasts between the past and the present.
- Most students identified literary elements—for example, diction, imagery, and symbols—but there is opportunity to develop their discussion of how the literary elements function in the poem and how they contribute to the depiction of the speaker's experience of returning home.
- Some students recognized that the speaker's experience was multifaceted, including interactions with the place itself, with family, and within the speaker herself. Those who did tended to recognize the complexity of the poem and to use the ideas in constructing their theses (or, for the more successful writers, in developing their line of reasoning).
- Most students had a thesis about the speaker's experience of returning home. There is opportunity, though, for students to construct more precise, nuanced arguments (for instance, exploring why the speaker's past memories conflict with her present experiences). There is also opportunity for students to develop a line of reasoning in their theses, previewing connections among the ideas they'll develop in their responses.
- Most students provided evidence from the poem, including direct quotations. There is opportunity, though, for students to connect the evidence more to their theses. For instance, rather than simply identifying that the speaker sees decay in the "crumbling heap of rotting black sticks" when she returns to Saint Louis, students can think more about why the poet uses those particular words and what that figurative, sensory-based language says about her experience.

- Some students noted the syntax and style of the poem. Often, these were passing references, mentioning that the poem has no punctuation and that only "I" is capitalized. There is opportunity for students to explore syntax further, though; for instance, discussing what the lack of attention to conventions says about the speaker struggling to fit in.
- There is opportunity for students to demonstrate their sophisticated thinking. In "Monologue for Saint Louis," two paths seem most accessible. First, students could focus more on tension in the poem, like how past memories conflict with present experiences or the challenge of staying true to oneself and family at the same time. Second, students might focus on situating their argument in a broader context, for instance, the impact of race on the speaker and her ambitions.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding*
• Most students had a thesis about the speaker's experience of returning home, though it often focused on a singular idea. There is opportunity for students to construct theses that capture more of the complexity of the poem.	• "The speaker chooses to sacrifice her warmth and her home when leaving and only does recognize the true prices of her departure when she returns to a completely transformed St.Louis." • "McElroy's unconventional approach to the structure of poetry and connection of vastly different ideas through similar descriptors all come together to create a map for the speaker to navigate the memories of her hometown and the joys and sorrows that come with it."
• Some students identified the lack of punctuation and that the letter "I" is the only capitalized letter in the poem. Most students did not, though, link syntax or style to the speaker and her shifting, complex experience of returning home.	• "The most obvious way that McElroy explores her memories of summer is the fact that this poem does not use uppercase letters excluding the title and when she refers to herself as 'I'. This immediatley gives the poem a more muted and somber tone as opposed to if she wrote it in a more standard form of English. McElroy's emphasis on the capatilized 'I's isolates the speaker from her memories as they exist in a different state from the speaker, both frozen in time and separated by miles of distance. This poem also does not include any punctuation marks, making it seem this monolouge is one uninterrupted thought from the speaker, making it all the more raw and heartbreaking to experience her memories. The absence of both of these elements in the poem add to the speaker's somber reflection of her childhood nostalgia and lends a unique understandind to the way she materializes her grief when returning home."

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer teachers to help them improve student performance on the exam?

Two foundational strategies for reading poetry can illuminate a great deal of meaning in a poem like Colleen McElroy's "Monologue for Saint Louis." It would be worth reminding students to:

1. **Take Advantage of the Title:** First, remind students of the importance of paying attention to the poem's title. Poetry already "leaves out" a lot of words and thoughts, so we want to take advantage of all the clues we have. The brief title of Colleen McElroy's poem tells us a lot as readers. "Monologue" gives us the genre, and the prefix "mono" highlights the fact that these will be thoughts from one person (which then reminds us to pay attention to point of view). Students can then infer that this will be a subjective poem, likely about not only what the speaker sees but also what she's thinking and feeling. "Saint Louis" indicates to students that we are now in an urban landscape, which makes the vivid natural imagery we encounter more interesting. And even the preposition "for" becomes important, suggesting support and telling us that the speaker apparently wants to see Saint Louis positively (and so, when we read the vivid descriptions with negative connotations in the poem, the speaker's conflict becomes even more pronounced). The title can cue us into content and themes, acting like a magnifying glass and making "small" ideas more pronounced.

2. **Map the Punctuation:** Students don't have to be experts in syntax in order to draw meaning from it. For instance, ask students to "map" the end-stopped punctuation, circling periods, question marks, exclamation points, semicolons, colons, and dashes (which visually help us to see how ideas are constructed and highlight length and number of ideas). In the case of "Colleen McElroy's Monologue for Saint Louis," this is a pretty simple map since there is no punctuation. As long as students keep in mind that a speaker (the "I" of the poem) has chosen to present the ideas in this way, without any punctuation and by not following traditional punctuation conventions, then there's something to learn here about the speaker herself. The unusual syntax, with ideas all flowing together without pause, suggests a speaker whose mind is racing and trying to capture as much as possible in a short amount of time, both memories and the present moment. There's a sense of rebellion in the lack of punctuation, too, like in our speaker, who wants something different or new for herself. Mapping the end-stopped punctuating, and even noticing the lack of punctuation, can help illuminate meaning for students.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

To better prepare students for the Poetry Analysis Free-Response Question, teachers may find the following resources helpful.

- Teachers may benefit from using the **Unit Guides** in the Course and Exam Description to pace and sequence their teaching of poetry analysis skills and to provide students with opportunities to practice these skills at increasing levels of difficulty and complexity.
- Students can develop their reading, analysis, and writing skills over the course of the year by practicing with the formative free-response questions in the **Progress Checks for Units 2, 5, and 8** on AP Classroom. Student performance on these formative assessments provides teachers with valuable data that can help inform their lesson planning throughout the year.
- The **AP Daily videos** on AP Classroom can supplement teachers' instruction, as well as provide remediation for individual students who may struggle with a particular skill.

- Students can practice with summative free-response questions that appeared on previous AP English Literature and Composition exams when a teacher assigns a Poetry Analysis free-response question from the **Question Bank** on AP Classroom. Teachers can simply filter the Question Type for FRQ: Poetry Analysis and/or for particular skills they'd like to have their students practice. These questions can be assigned as homework or as in-class assessments.
- **Student Samples, Scoring Guidelines, and Scoring Commentaries** for the Poetry Analysis free-response question can be found on AP Central. The Scoring Commentaries clarify how the student samples earned the various points described in the Scoring Guidelines. Reviewing the samples and commentaries with students can help teachers illustrate the difference between the construction of solid arguments and that of more precise, nuanced arguments, an important distinction highlighted in the list of observations above about student performance this year on Question 1.

Question 2

Task: Prose Fiction Analysis
Topic: Rachel Cusk, *The Bradshaw Variations*
Max Score: 6
Mean Score: 3.22

	Max Points:	Mean Score:
Row A: Thesis	1	.89
Row B: Evidence and Commentary	4	2.29
Row C: Sophistication	1	.04

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

For Question 2, the Prose Fiction Analysis question, students were asked to read an excerpt from Rachel Cusk's novel *The Bradshaw Variations* and respond to the following prompt:

> The following excerpt is from Rachel Cusk's novel *The Bradshaw Variations*, published in 2008. This passage describes Thomas Bradshaw's morning interactions with members of his household. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Cusk uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas.

In a timed-writing situation and with an unfamiliar text, students were expected to complete three main tasks successfully.

Reading the prose passage means reading closely for both literary techniques and meaning, which can be an additional challenge for some students given the relative length and richness of the prose passage. Students were expected to view the text specifically as a prose passage, recognizing conventions particular to the genre, and then analyze how those techniques are used to shape the passage and its meaning, in this case to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas. For example, in the excerpt from *The Bradshaw Variations*, students might notice the initial characterization of Thomas ("In the mornings he listens to music, to Bach or Schubert"); see the contrast between Thomas' thoughts about how he interacts with his lodger, Olga, and his outward response toward her (for instance, "He hears her tread on the stairs and doesn't recognize it: that is how, every day, he identifies her, by hearing her quiet, slightly plodding step and wondering who on earth it belongs to"); and recognize that while Thomas' wife Tonie is physically absent, she figuratively is present in the kitchen through a simile recounted by the narrator ("He is waiting for Tonie to come down, as the platform guard waits for the London train to come through. Tonie's appearances in the kitchen are brief"). Students will find ample literary techniques to explore, like textual details, imagery, diction, and analogy, and some will recognize that metaphor and simile especially contribute to characterization (like the train station metaphor, "He hears Olga—in some ways he even identifies with her, both of them platform dwellers—but when she speaks he cannot reciprocate," and the mould simile, "He is forty-one, the age when a life comes out of its own past like something out of a mould; and either it is solid, all of a piece, or it fails to hold its shape and disintegrates"). More advanced readers will notice how the concept of "authenticity" and its importance to Thomas frames the passage, appearing in the first paragraph and the last.

Analyzing the prose passage means taking the relevant parts that students identified in their reading and thinking about how the parts function collectively to create meaning in the prose passage, in particular how they combine to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas. In the excerpt from *The Bradshaw Variations*, students might consider Thomas' age and the relevance of the mould simile, where "The disintegration" of what comes out of the mould "is not difficult to imagine." Students could also explore why, although Thomas "even identifies himself with" Olga, he struggles to interact with her: "He is as though sealed behind glass"

and “He wonders if she realizes this, realizes that she can see but not touch him.” Related, they could consider Thomas’ use of the train metaphor to describe his wife and his focus on her mundane qualities (“Like the train she stops, disgorging activity, and then departs again”) and his own relationship to her (“as the platform guard waits for the London train”). Some students will notice that Thomas spends the majority of his time considering Olga, with only a passing reference to Tonie. More advanced readers will recognize the reappearance of “authenticity” in the final sentence, that there’s a relationship to “decay,” and consider what this all means about Thomas and his complex portrayal.

Writing a well-written response to a prose passage means that students demonstrate the ability to establish an overall defensible thesis and build the argument through evidence and commentary, ideally constructing a line of reasoning that shows the complexity of their understanding. A challenge of any prose passage lies in the amount of evidence that students must account for and analyze, a challenge certainly present in the excerpt from *The Bradshaw Variations*, given the ample details of Thomas’ characterization, both literal and figurative descriptions. Additionally, there is an irony to the details, that a “minor” character like the lodger Olga receives a large share of the description and attention. (It could be easy for writers to forget Tonie and her four sentences!) Students with more successful responses will discuss the passage more fully, accounting for Thomas, Olga, and Tonie, linking those discussions to form a line of reasoning. Or, the student might situate their thesis in the broader context of the concept of authenticity (or another context, like gender or midlife expectations), with the more successful writer able to sustain that focus throughout the response (thus earning the sophistication point). It should again be noted that students are not expected in the timed exam to write a polished, revised essay but rather are engaged in a process of thinking as they explore the passage and draft their response.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skill(s) required on this question?

Overall, responses to Free-Response Question 2, Prose Fiction Analysis, were generally solid, though this was the most challenging essay for students this year of the three they wrote. The excerpt from *The Bradshaw Variations* was a largely accessible passage, especially in terms of language and style, although some students struggled with certain details, like making sense of Thomas’ fascination with “authenticity.”
In addition:

- Most students were able to read and understand the overall narrative of the passage, that Thomas was in his kitchen, awaiting his wife Tonie, and reflecting on himself and his interactions with others, including their lodger Olga.
- Most students had a thesis about Thomas’ portrayal in the passage. Often, however, the theses offered overly simplified arguments, for instance that Thomas was unhappy or bored. Similar to the Poetry Analysis responses, there is opportunity for students to construct more precise, nuanced arguments (for instance, to explore the contrasts between Thomas and Tonie or the similarities between Thomas and Olga and consider what they say about Thomas and his complex portrayal).
- Most students were able to identify at least one literary element in the passage, with textual details, imagery, diction, simile, and metaphor the most frequently discussed.
- Most students included evidence, including direct quotations, to support their characterization of Thomas and to develop their thesis. There is opportunity, though, for students to use a more varied range of evidence from throughout the passage. Students tended to rely on details specifically about Thomas (for instance, how “These conversations” with Olga “do not entirely engage” him) but would overlook other related details (like the details of the extended description of Olga’s “protracted dentistry” and what they may suggest about the conversation he’s involved in). As a result, students

often missed opportunities to understand Thomas' motivations, like why he is not engaged by conversations with Olga.
- Relatedly, while most students made individual claims about Thomas' portrayal, there is opportunity to more clearly connect those ideas and to explore how those ideas are related to the defensible claim (to construct a line of reasoning).
- There is also opportunity for students to demonstrate their sophisticated thinking. In the excerpt from *The Bradshaw Variations*, the path of situating the interpretation in a broader context would seem to offer the most potential. For instance, while students frequently mentioned Thomas' concern with maintaining "authenticity," they often neglected to explore the meaning of the concept and how it contributes to Thomas' complex portrayal. Sustaining a discussion like this throughout the response will earn the student the sophistication point in Row C.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding*
• Most students had a thesis about Thomas' portrayal. Often, however, the theses offered overly simplified arguments. There is opportunity for students to construct more precise, nuanced arguments that account for the complexity in Thomas' portrayal.	• "Through the use of contrast between Thomas' reality and his philisophical musings, similes, and lack of dialogue, Cusk develops Thomas as a man struggling to understand his place in the world as he ages." • "Through these contrasts, structural choices, and similes, Cusk forms a complex portrayal of Thomas' inner life as a constant cycle of mundanity and his deep desire to get out of it, despite his acknowledgement he will never be able to do so."
• Olga's role was often not taken fully into account. Students would identify her and summarize the conversation about her dental issues, but they missed opportunities to explore how the details about Olga contributed to Thomas' complex portrayal.	• "He briefly connects himself to Olga through this simile, believing her to be a 'platform dweller' as well, perhaps due to her endless chatter with no real purpose, but still cannot connect the apathy he feels. When he returns to his thoughts, Thomas then describes the feeling inside him as 'like decay' or 'an inner force', as something that he cannot escape. He feels that no matter his choices, he is unable to escape the life he has made for himself and become able to respond to Olga's superfluous friendliness. Thomas' outlook on his future is overwhelmingly negative, as decay is inevitable and unpreventable, just as he believes his apathy is as well. His emotional state is further developed through the structure of the passage itself."

	• "Secondly, Cusk uses imagery to describe the feeling of disconnect Thomas feels with inauthentic things. For example, she writes, 'He is as though sealed behind glass. He wonders if she realises this, realises that she can see but not touch him,' (par 4). Olga cannot break through to Thomas in this conversation because he feels it is inauthentic. To Thomas, this is the same conversation happening every morning, and he is having difficulty reciprocating. Thomas understands this as a failure of his, and that is why he turns the music up, as a sort of penance for his failure to be reached. The authenticity of things matters deeply to Thomas, and it shows through his conversations with Olga. No matter how often they talk, he cannot develop an actual relationship like the one Thomas has with Tonie, because their morning conversations are inauthentic."

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer teachers to help them improve student performance on the exam?

1. **Notice–Focus–Interpret** can be a helpful model to show a *process* for identifying and analyzing, offering students concrete steps to negotiate a rich, detailed passage like the excerpt from *The Bradshaw Variations*. Here is a quick overview of the process. **Notice:** With or without a prompt in mind, what do you see in a text? Don't judge, just list or annotate aspects of the text that seem important. **Focus:** We want to do something with everything we've noticed, so we dial-in on a question or controlling element. For the AP English Literature and Composition exam, the focus could be the main idea of the prompt—in the case of Question 2, if I'm thinking about "Thomas' complex portrayal," then what's most relevant in my list? **Interpret:** Using that focus and those relevant items, what is the evidence telling you? Remember that analysis is always circular and ongoing—you can go back to more Noticing, for instance, at any time.

   Notice–Focus–Interpret can provide students with a framework for how to approach analysis of a prose excerpt. Sometimes students can struggle to see how textual details "add up" and contribute toward an overall argument. The Notice part of N–F–I can help students identify related details and how they work together to create meaning. As a class, brainstorm important aspects of rich texts, writing everything on the board—the more information the better. Offer small groups a guiding question (a Focus) and ask them to select relevant evidence from the board *and* to draft commentary that explains the relationship of the evidence to the question. Students practice both selecting the strongest evidence and constructing commentary. Along the way, encourage students to use the full passage and to identify individual words and well as longer quotations that can support their interpretation.

2. **Build a Line of Reasoning with Topic Sentences:** Topic sentences often get overlooked as a junior-high skill, a developmental step we once learned but have now moved past. However, effective topic sentences have so much to offer students taking the AP English Literature and Composition exam. First, a precise, detailed topic sentence gives the student a focus as they're writing that paragraph and helps them to select appropriate evidence and to develop relevant commentary. Second, topic sentences not only preview information to come but they can clarify relationships between paragraphs and ideas by

reiterating what has previously been discussed. In other words, they connect ideas within the interpretation and help build that line of reasoning. Focusing instruction on topic sentences gives teachers a chance to demonstrate for students how they control the line of reasoning: they identify the key ideas, they identify the relationships among ideas, and they articulate through the topic sentences the line of reasoning they are constructing (as well as further developing the line of reasoning in their body paragraphs).

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

To better prepare students for the Prose Fiction Analysis Free-Response Question, teachers may find the following resources helpful.

- Teachers may benefit from using the **Unit Guides** in the Course and Exam Description to pace and sequence their teaching of prose fiction analysis skills and to provide students with opportunities to practice these skills at increasing levels of difficulty and complexity.
- Students can develop their reading, analysis, and writing skills over the course of the year by practicing with the formative free-response questions in the **Progress Checks for Units 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 9** on AP Classroom. Student performance on these formative assessments provides teachers with valuable data that can help inform their lesson planning throughout the year.
- The **AP Daily videos** on AP Classroom can supplement teachers' instruction, as well as provide remediation for individual students who may struggle with a particular skill.
- Students can practice with summative free-response questions that appeared on previous AP English Literature and Composition exams when a teacher assigns a Prose Fiction Analysis Free-Response Question from the **Question Bank** on AP Classroom. Teachers can simply filter the Question Type for FRQ: Prose Fiction Analysis and/or for particular skills they'd like to have their students practice. These questions can be assigned as homework or as in-class assessments.
- **Student Samples, Scoring Guidelines, and Scoring Commentaries** for the Prose Fiction Analysis Free-Response Question can be found on AP Central. The Scoring Commentaries clarify how the student samples earned the various points described in the Scoring Guidelines. Reviewing the samples and commentaries with students can help teachers illustrate the difference between essays that construct a strong line of reasoning versus those that struggled to connect individual claims and evidence to the overall argument, an important skill highlighted in the list of observations above about student performance this year on Question 2.

Question 3

Task: Literary Argument
Topic: Memory
Max Score: 6
Mean Score: 3.50

	Max Points:	Mean Score:
Row A: Thesis	1	.91
Row B: Evidence and Commentary	4	2.52
Row C: Sophistication	1	.07

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

For Question 3, the Literary Argument question, students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

> In many works of literature, characters may be significantly affected by memories of the past. A character may be inspired by the past, haunted by the past, unable to let go of the past, or motivated by the past to craft a better future.
>
> Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which a character is significantly affected by a memory. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the impact of the memory on the character contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

In a timed-writing situation and without the text in hand, students were expected to complete three main tasks successfully.

Selecting a work of fiction that addresses the focus of the prompt, in this case a text with a character significantly affected by a memory, is the first essential step for students. Students benefit from more complex texts—ones that contain multiple viewpoints, a variety of characters or narrative arcs, and language that lends itself to interpretation. Texts with less complexity often make analysis more difficult. The list of texts offered with the prompt is meant to provide suggestions, representing diverse options, that work for the particular focus of the prompt; however, students are not limited by the list in their text selection and may choose any text they feel works well for the prompt and about which they feel confident writing. Students demonstrate the appropriateness of their chosen text through their analysis and writing. It should be noted that there is no list of acceptable texts.

Analyzing the work of fiction requires two steps. First, students are asked to identify a fictional text "in which a character is significantly affected by a memory." The prompt offers students suggestions of a variety of ways that memory can impact a character—the character "may be inspired by the past, haunted by the past, unable to let go of the past, or motivated by the past to craft a better future." Importantly, the prompt does not define the concept of "memory" definitively but instead invites students to define the concept themselves in different or unique ways, depending on the text and character they choose. Second, students analyze "how the impact of the memory on the character contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole." In their analysis, students demonstrate both their ability to focus on the "micro" (a particular relevant character who is significantly impacted by a memory) and to consider the "macro" (to examine the broader implications of that memory across the text overall). Students are cautioned not to summarize the text, a reminder that the evidence they draw from the text should be used in service to analysis.

Writing a well-written literary argument requires students to negotiate a range of information, including the focus of the prompt and evidence from a substantial text. In this particular prompt, students were tasked with articulating a thesis about "a work of fiction in which a character is significantly affected by a memory" as well as "how the impact of the memory on the character contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole." Students must develop their arguments through evidence and commentary, with the more successful responses building a line of reasoning that connects ideas and shows the relationships between them. Students are not expected to use direct quotations in their response, though stronger responses use more specific, precise evidence, and use the evidence as support for defensible claims rather than merely as plot summary. A well-written response is more than grammatically correct writing, and it should again be noted that students are not expected in the timed-writing context to write a polished, revised essay.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skill(s) required on this question?

Generally, students found the prompt accessible and understood the concept of a memory. They used a variety of texts to explore how the impact of the memory on the character contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. In particular:

- Because students do not have the text in front of them in Question 3 (as they do in the Poetry and Prose Fiction Analysis questions), understanding the prompt and concept is especially essential. Most students understood the concept of memory and were able to identify a text and a relevant and applicable character who is impacted by a memory.
- The prompt offers four ways in which a memory might impact a character (though students are not required to use them), and while students responded to all four of these ways, "haunting" and "binding" constituted the majority, with many responses considering how traumatic events haunt characters and prevent them from living in the present and/or being oriented toward a brighter future.
- Some students, however, did struggle to understand the prompt as written, focusing on "the past" (a term also used in the prompt) rather than "memory," and presented claims about things that happened to characters in their pasts but did not consistently center the concept of memory in their analysis. There is opportunity here for students to identify key terms and expectations of the Question 3 prompt, in order to ensure they understand the concept fully and make the most appropriate choices of text and character.
- Some students were insightful and creative in their definition of what constituted a memory. The prompt affords students this opportunity, and stronger responses often identified less typical examples. For instance, students wrote about the absence of memory and the impact that absence had on a character about multiple characters and examined how each of them was differently impacted by the same memory, and about collective cultural memory. Some sophisticated essays focused on the concept of faulty or unreliable memory and demonstrated that memory mediates a character's relationship to the past in ways that are not always straightforward, deterministic, or fully available to the character.
- Most students had a thesis about how a memory impacted a character. Often, however, the theses offered overly simplified arguments. For instance, the student would argue that the memory caused trauma but stopped short of saying what "trauma" meant in that particular text and to that particular character. Similar to the other two free-response questions, there is opportunity for students to construct more precise, nuanced arguments.
- Relatedly, some students, though they presented a defensible claim about memory, then struggled to keep their discussion focused on the memory and its impact. Instead, they would discuss the current plight of the selected character without acknowledging the impact of the memory.
- Most students included evidence to support their discussion of a character's memory. However, some students relied on overly general evidence (which was often in service to plot summary rather than a

more specific discussion of the impact of the memory itself). There is opportunity for students to use more specific and varied evidence, including details of characterization that are relevant to the impact of the memory and to the interpretation of the work as a whole.

- Students who created a clear line of reasoning or demonstrated a sophisticated response often did so through analyzing how the impact of the memory on the character contributes to the interpretation of the work as a whole. The most common path for the sophistication point was to situate the thesis in a broader context, usually historical. Another common path was to explore complexities and tensions in the text.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding*
• Most students had a thesis about the impact of a memory on a character. Often, however, the theses offered overly simplified arguments. There is opportunity for students to construct more precise, nuanced arguments.	• "Dr. Manette provides a smaller-scale representation of the sorrow of an entire populace, allowing for the audience to connect with the struggles of the people of France, even as their actions are condemned. In this way, memory serves as a chief theme in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, portrayed most notably through Dr. Manette, as his sufferings explore not only the damage memories can have on an individual, but also the larger ramifications of trauma and its lasting impact on a society."
• Most students included evidence to support their discussion about the impact of a memory on a character. However, some students relied on overly general evidence. There is opportunity for students to use more specific and varied evidence that is relevant to the impact of the memory and its contribution to an interpretation of the work as a whole.	• "Throughout the novel [Lisa Ko, *The Leavers*], Ko alternates between the past and present life of Deming Guo, who originally believed that his mother, Peilin had abandoned him. The sudden event of Peilin's absence in Deming's life depicts not only a misunderstanding for Deming, but a lifelong trouble that he tries to understand even in his adulthood. Because no one how Peilin disappeared, Deming became the outsider within his uncle's family, despite being close with his cousin, Michael. Despite their familial ties, Deming's uncle decided to give up Deming when faced wih financial struggles and supporting his family, which shows the utmost importance of the parental presence in an individual's life. In reality, Peilin had been taken away by force and lived at an isolated labor camp for years before escaping. The immense confusion and self-blame in Deming's early childhood forms a consistent struggle in university and relationships in both his family and his band,

	representing the result parental absence that leads hinders the growth of the child." • "Dr. Manette's memories likewise serve as a stark mirror for the current state of Paris. Dr. Manette's mental illness ebs and flows with the social and political tide of France, as his memories are later shown to be connected to them. In this way, Dr. Manette serves as both a view of the individual struggles happening in France, and the grand ideas held within the country as a whole. Although Dr. Manette is initially portrayed as far removed from the conflict, Dickens eventually reveals his close ties to the start of the Revolution. In this way, Dickens shows Dr. Manette as less of an individual but more of a symbol, who reflects the pain and suffering of the people in France. He has been hurt and suffered great injustice, as is the same with the French citizens, and both parties find that a grand upheaval is needed to get their lives back. In this way, Dr. Manette represents the memories and suffering of all those in France, and how the ways of dealing with deep sorrow and traumatic memories can so greatly differ."

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer teachers to help them improve student performance on the exam?

Two Questions to a Stronger Thesis: Students usually have a thesis on the AP English Literature and Composition exam, but often, the thesis is overly general and does not capture the nuances found in the complex text. For instance, a student might argue that a hidden secret caused trauma. "Trauma" is definitely an impact of the memory, and the student has recognized that the impact of the memory is significant. So, while it is still a general idea, they are headed in the right direction.

Let's elevate that thesis, though, into something that demonstrates more analysis and interpretation and allows the student to show off more of their thinking.

Time is limited and valuable in the exam, so we want the student to be efficient yet still thoughtful.

Two simple questions can help the student think further about their thesis and overall argument and elevate the ideas without taking undue time:

- First, with their thesis draft in mind, ask the student to consider: What do I mean by key terms in my thesis? In the case of our example, the student can make "trauma" more specific by asking: What does trauma mean in my particular text and for this particular character?

- Second, ask the student to think more as a doubter and consider: Where in the text I selected does the evidence *not* support my argument? How do I need to adjust my thinking as a result?

By generating these new ideas (without taking much time), students can refine their argument, incorporating more nuanced, specific ideas, as well as doing some more planning for how they will construct their response. A few minutes of time and thinking can be leveraged into a more detailed, more intentional response.

Brainstorm, Brainstorm, Brainstorm: A challenge of the Literary Argument Question is that students are expected to create a defensible claim and support it with evidence and commentary when they do not have the text in front of them.

To help students leverage their familiarity with their text and to negotiate the challenges of working from memory, encourage them to take a few minutes and brainstorm, brainstorm, brainstorm what they recall from their chosen text.

Keep this simple because students have enough on their plates. Start with the guiding concept from the Literary Argument prompt—this year, the impact of memory on a character—and before students do anything else, take a few minutes and write down as many details, facts, and especially specifics as they can recall about a specific text. Encourage them—insist!—to set aside judgement and just write down as much as they can, anything they can recall that seems even remotely relevant. The idea here is to take a couple of minutes to eliminate the stress that limits our thinking and recall, in order to capture as much information about their chosen text as possible.

After a minute or two (they can really recall a lot in that time), students can take another minute to do some preliminary thinking, like identifying the most relevant evidence and filling in some blanks. They can also do some quick planning, generating initial ideas about the meaning of the evidence as it relates to the concept from the prompt.

There is little risk here, because the bar is low, with students simply trying to generate as much evidence as possible in a short amount of time. With some practice, student recall becomes even more precise and students have even better evidence to work with as they switch attention to analyzing, constructing their thesis, and planning their response.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

To better prepare students for the Literary Argument Free-Response Question, teachers may find the following resources helpful.

- Teachers may benefit from using the **Unit Guides** in the Course and Exam Description to pace and sequence their teaching of literary argument skills in the context of prose fiction and to provide students with opportunities to practice these skills at increasing levels of difficulty and complexity.
- Students can develop their reading, analysis, and writing skills over the course of the year by practicing with the formative free-response questions in the **Progress Checks for Units 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 9** on AP Classroom. Student performance on these formative assessments provides teachers with valuable data that can help inform their lesson planning throughout the year.
- The **AP Daily videos** on AP Classroom can supplement teachers' instruction, as well as provide remediation for individual students who may struggle with a particular skill.
- Students can practice with summative free-response questions that appeared on previous AP English Literature and Composition exams when a teacher assigns a Literary Argument Free-Response Question from the **Question Bank** on AP Classroom. Teachers can simply filter the Question Type for FRQ: Literary Argument and/or for particular skills they'd like to have their students practice. These questions can be assigned as homework or as in-class assessments.

- **Student Samples, Scoring Guidelines, and Scoring Commentaries** for the Literary Argument Free-Response Question can be found on AP Central. The Scoring Commentaries clarify how the student samples earned the various points described in the Scoring Guidelines. Reviewing the samples and commentaries with students can help teachers illustrate the difference between essays that provide specific evidence in support of the interpretation and evidence that is overly general, an important skill highlighted in the list of observations above about student performance this year on Question 3.