

Advice for Success on the AP English Literature Exam: Multiple-Choice

Section I: multiple-choice: 60 minutes to read four or five passages and answer 50–55 questions (with five choices each):

Strategies:

- Don't assume that there'll be four passages—yes, it's usually four, but there may be five. Check quickly and begin.
- Quickly check the number of the question and the number on the answer form every time you see a zero (10, 20, 30...). This double-check can keep you from getting off track, or having to go back to find your error and wasting time.
- Keep yourself on 'time track' by scanning the number of questions and dividing by two: if there's 54 questions, and you have 60 minutes to complete the MC section, you should be around question 27 after 30 minutes.
- If you have four passages to read in 60 minutes, allot 15 minutes to each, moving steadily.
- Each passage has a combination of easy, medium, and hard questions that generally follow the chronology of the passage rather than move from easiest to hardest or vice versa. However, they are all worth the same, so go for the easy and medium questions first. Choose which questions to answer, which to skip, and which to return to if time allows. *If you spend too much time on a single hard question, you may not get to answer two or three easy ones in a later passage.*

When you “skip,” mark your standard answer and make a light mark out to the side, so you can return to it.

- Be careful of qualifiers like “best,” “overall,” “primary,” or “principal.”
 - Answer first the questions that limit you to a particular paragraph or line.
 - When the question refers to a part of the sentence and asks for the meaning of a word or phrase in context, what a word refers to, or how a word functions, go back to the beginning of that sentence—or even to the previous sentence—and read completely to the end of that sentence. Some questions ask what the antecedent of a word is, and the answer is found in the preceding sentence. You may also want to read the sentence that follows—the answer could be there.
 - Double-check the text to be sure the answer you have chosen fits in the context of the question.
 - **Pick a simple and elegant answer choice over a complex and abstruse one.**
 - If you consistently choose the wrong answer out of two, force yourself to go with the other one.
 - Running out of time? Scan the remaining questions and look for either the shortest ones, or those that direct you to a specific line or paragraph, or those that contain the answer without requiring you to return to the text: “The sea slid silently from the shore” is an example of alliteration. You would not have to go back to find the answer.
- **This strategy takes only a few seconds:**
- Scan the questions first *but not the answers*, since four out of five of them are wrong.
 - Skip any questions with options that direct you to a specific line number—this eliminates the majority of questions.
 - Many times, in the questions that are left, clues about the meaning of the passage will be revealed. Some say they had no idea what the passage was about until they read the questions.

- Read and answer the questions on only three of the four provided passages (or four of the five) first. Flip through the test quickly in the beginning and determine which section has the fewest number of questions. That is the passage to answer last.
- Quickly scan the passages before you begin to get a sense of what each is about. Decide which one is the least comprehensible (usually a pre-1900 passage). That's the passage to skip at first.
- Shoot for answering 80% the first time through, leaving approximately two guesses for each passage. Which ones to guess? Ones that take a lot of time to answer: the "EXCEPTs"; the I, II, IIIs; the footnotes. Now answer all the "easier" questions. Still time left? Go back and work through the ones you skipped. Usually what happens is, you do not have time to go back, but the ones you skipped you likely would have missed anyway.
- Choose the passages you know you can do best on—if certain time periods are more difficult for you, save those passages for last or for skipping. Now you have time to read more carefully and answer more questions correctly. As a result, you achieve a higher MC score even with completely omitting a passage. *This is a strategy for students who struggle to make 3's, not for students trying to make 4's or 5's.*
- If you can eliminate two answers on MC questions, you have a one in three chance of guessing correctly; if you can eliminate three answers, you have a fifty-fifty chance. Make the guess—and tell yourself you got it right.
- *Leave no questions unanswered.* There is no penalty for guessing. A shot in the dark just may hit the target! If you guess wildly, stick with the same letter. Erase stray marks!!

"I've heard that 60% on the multiple-choice and three 6's on the essays will get me a passing grade of 3."

It's true that if you write three strong essays, you can get quite a few MC questions wrong and still get a good overall score. The simplistic answer is 50% on the MC. That score would keep a student 'alive' going into the essays. If the essays average 6, the student would most likely end up with a 3 on the exam.

A 6, while undistinguished, is a good score. But students concerned about the MC section are more likely to produce three essays averaging closer to 5—say a 7, a 5, and a 4. So they need closer to 66% of the MC to pass with a 3. If a student scored 66% on the MC and his essays were all 5's, he would have scored a 3 overall; 66% on the MC with two 6's and a 7 on the essays would have put him in the 4 score category.

Those who score lower because they don't finish the MC tend to do *better* on the essays than those who get the same score by finishing the questions but missing more. Those first students are more comfortable with the material but plod methodically through the questions, while the others are moving faster but do not have as strong a grip on the passages. A surprising number of students fit this pattern. Remember: the essay section counts more than the multiple choice.

The biggest MC problem is vocabulary. Many students just do not know many words and are unable to distinguish among the multiple meanings of those they do know.

Types of MC questions:

Vocabulary in context

Using the indicated portion of the text, what does the word or phrase mean? Skill: definition.

Inference of meaning/ drawing conclusions

Which answer best summarizes or defines the text? Skills: reading comprehension; making inferences.

Rhetorical and/or literary techniques

What particular literary term applies to this word, or phrase, or sentence, or paragraph, or passage? Reference: vocabulary within the text; rhetorical strategies; literary devices. Skill: definition.

Passage and author's purpose

In the passage, what is the rhetorical purpose of a particular word, or phrase, or sentence, or paragraph? Skill: reading comprehension; determining author's purpose.

Description and development/ word reference – pronoun/antecedent/organization

Why is a particular element of the passage placed where it is? What does it refer to? Skill: reading comprehension; determining author's purpose.

These make your brain hurt

'Roman numeral' questions: remember that all parts of an answer choice must apply. 'Except' questions: remember that any evidence from the passage for an answer choice makes that choice wrong.

Wrong answer choices follow certain patterns:

- They require only a surface reading, not a close understanding.
- They are simplistic—they have less depth.
- They give generalities when specificity is required.
- They are unrelated to the question.
- They are unrelated to the material of the passage.
- One part of the answer is correct, but not the other.

Remember Common Answer Options:

1-Best answer (most defensible)

1-Also correct

2-Plausible, not possible

1-Misread – an answer that supports a misreading of the passage (can be a pronoun/antecedent)

Simply substitute the noun for the pronoun to eliminate distracters.