

# CHAPTER 7

## The Free-Response Essay



### IN THIS CHAPTER

**Summary:** Examination of the free-response essay and its purpose as it is presented in the AP English Literature exam

#### Key Ideas

- ✧ Learn the types of free-response prompts you might encounter in the AP English Literature exam
- ✧ Practice various ways of organizing the information based on your chosen literary work
- ✧ Learn the basics of constructing your response to the free-response prompt
- ✧ Learn about the rubrics and rating of the AP free-response essays
- ✧ Examine model student essays
- ✧ Learn how rubrics were used to rate student essays
- ✧ Learn how the synthesis essay differs from the argumentative and analysis essays
- ✧ Learn the process of dealing with many texts

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### Introduction to the Free-Response Essay

Nothing in life is free, but this essay does indicate that the end is near. So, hang in there. However, a cliché-clogged essay is *not* the indicator of the high-range essay. This chapter will provide the information and the practice you need to “knock their socks off.”



### What is a free-response essay?

The free-response essay is based on a provocative question that highlights specific insights applicable to a broad range of literary texts. The question provides for varied personal interpretations and multiple approaches. It allows students to truly create the specific substance of their own essay.

### What is the purpose of the free-response essay?

The College Board wants to assess your ability to discuss a work of literature in a particular context. The illustrations you include in your essay will demonstrate your insights and critical thinking as well as your writing ability.

### What makes this essay “free”?

Although the question is the same for all students, you have total freedom to choose the piece of literature to which you will refer. Once chosen, you have total freedom to select the specifics that will support your thesis. Unlike the other two essays, which have rubrics based on certain concrete interpretations and directions of the text, your free-response essay will be uniquely your own.

### If this is total freedom of expression, how can I ever get less than a 9?

The test reader is expecting an essay that demonstrates a mature understanding and defense of the prompt. Your paper must be specific and well organized. It must also adhere to the topic. You will lose major credit for providing only plot summary. Your illustrations should be cogent and insightful rather than obvious or superficial. For a high score, you must bring something specific and relevant to the page.

### What are the pitfalls of the free-response essay?

It is our experience that the free-response question is a double-edged sword. Students can suffer from overconfidence because of the open nature of this essay. They depend on memory rather than on preparation and often go for the most obvious illustrations. They tend to ramble on in vague and unsupported generalities, and they frequently provide incorrect information. *The failure to plan and limit can undermine this essay.*

Students often have trouble choosing the appropriate work and lose valuable time pondering a variety of choices. It is important to be decisive and confident in your presentation.

### What kinds of works may I refer to in this essay?

Generally, you are asked to choose a full-length work, almost always a novel or play. However, if the prompt says “choose a work,” you may use a poem, short story, novella, or work of nonfiction. Note: You may *never* use a film.

### Must I use the list of works provided at the bottom of the prompt?

Absolutely not! Since this is a free-response essay, the choice of a literary work is up to you. You should choose a work that is appropriate to the prompt, one that is appropriate to AP students, and one that is comfortable for you.



### Must I use works read this year?

No, but why would you choose any work that could be a faded memory or unsuitable for AP-level analysis? We always recommend using works that you studied in class and have read and discussed throughout the year. One exception occurs when you have written a lengthy literary research paper or a sustained critical analysis. In this situation, you may have real in-depth familiarity with a work that you could adapt to a free-response question. By all means, go for it!

### How do I prepare for the free-response essay?

You need to tell yourself in September or October that you will be taking the exam next May. This will emphasize the point that throughout the year you will have to keep some type of record of the works you have read and some specific points you want to make about each of them. (In Chapter 8, we introduce several techniques and processes that will enable you to keep these records.)

By the time of the exam in May, you need to be thoroughly conversant with at least three to five full-length works from different genres, eras, and literary movements.

You also need to practice. Practice writing questions, practice choosing appropriate works, and practice writing responses to questions. Practice!

### What criteria do the AP readers use to rate a free-response essay?

The readers are looking for literary insights and awareness of character, comprehension of theme, and the ability to transfer specific ideas and details to a universal concept. In addition, the readers are hoping to see a writer who reveals and understands the relationships among form, content, style, and structure and their effects on the meaning of the work. The essay should indicate the writer's ability to choose appropriate illustrations from a full-length work and to connect them in a thoughtful way. The sophisticated writer will refer to plot but will not summarize. As always, the reader is looking for a well-organized essay written in a mature voice.

### What happens if I use a work that the reader doesn't know?

This should not be a major concern to you. Throughout the year, your AP instructor has provided you with appropriate literary experiences suitable for addressing this prompt. In addition, be assured that any work we mention in this book will be appropriate. Be sure to consult our suggested reading list to increase your range of choices. Any other works by the same author would probably be on an appropriate AP level. For the most part, the AP prefers works from the literary canon because they exhibit breadth and complexity for literary scholarship. Don't fight these requirements. You do yourself a disservice when you insist on trying to outwit or beat the system.

Having said all this, if by chance you do choose an obscure work and present it well, the reader will respond accordingly.

## Types of Free-Response Prompts

Here are some topics that could be the basis for a free-response prompt. We also include some suggested works for these.



- The journey as a major force in a work. (*Gulliver's Travels*, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Stranger*, *The Kite Runner*, etc.)
- What happens to a dream deferred? (*Hedda Gabler*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, etc.)
- Transformation (literal and/or figurative). (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Black Like Me*, *Metamorphosis*, etc.)
- Descent into madness/hell. (*Medea*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Secret Sharer*, etc.)
- An ironic reversal in a character's beliefs or actions. (*Heart of Darkness*, *The Stranger*, *Oedipus*, etc.)
- Perception and reality—"What is, is not." (*Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, etc.)
- A child becomes a force to reveal \_\_\_\_\_. (*Jane Eyre*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Lord of the Flies*, etc.)
- Ceremony or ritual plays an important role. (*The Stranger*, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, etc.)
- The role of the fool, comic character, or wise servant who reveals \_\_\_\_\_. (*King Lear*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Tartuffe*, etc.)

*Note:* Fill in works you would use to respond to the above prompts.

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"I really like bearing  
and reading how  
the other students do  
the same questions.  
It helps me evaluate  
my own ideas and  
essays."

—Adam S.

AP student



Here's another set of possible free-response prompts for development:

- How an opening scene or chapter establishes the character, conflict, or theme of a major literary work.
- How a minor character is used to develop a major character.
- How violence relates to character or theme.
- How time is a major factor.
- The ways in which an author changes the reader's attitude(s) toward a subject.
- The use of contrasting settings.
- Parent/child or sibling relationships and their significance.
- The analysis of a villain with regard to the meaning of the work.
- The use of an unrealistic character or element and its effect on the work.
- The relevance of a nonmodern work to the present day.
- The conflict between passion and responsibility.
- The conflict between character and society.

*Note:* To our knowledge, a free-response question has never been repeated. Therefore, we suggest:



1. Use the prompts cited earlier when you discuss works you read or when you write about those works throughout the year.
2. Generate a list of topics that would also be suitable for free-response prompts. Discuss, outline, or prepare sample essays utilizing these questions.



Anticipating prompts and responses is a productive way to prepare for this exam.

## General Rubrics for the Free-Response Essay



Let's take a look at the general rubrics for the free-response essay.

A **9** essay has all the qualities of an 8 essay, and the writing style is especially impressive, as is the relationship between the text and the subtext and the inclusion of supporting detail.

An **8** essay will effectively and cohesively address the prompt. It will refer to an appropriate work for the task and provide specific and relevant references from the text to illustrate and support the writer's thesis related to the journey indicated in the prompt and its relationship to character and theme. The essay will present the writer's ability to perceive the relationship between text and subtext in a clear and mature writing style.

A **7** essay has all the properties of a 6, only with more well-developed analysis/discussion of the relationship between development of character and how it relates to the journey or a more mature writing style.

A **6** essay adequately addresses the prompt. The analysis/discussion is on target and makes use of appropriate references from the chosen literary work to support the interrelationship between the character, his journey, and the work's theme. But these elements are less fully developed than they are in essays in the 7, 8, or 9 range. The writer's ideas are expressed with clarity, but the writing may have a few errors in syntax and/or diction. A **5** essay demonstrates that the writer understands the prompt's requirements. The analysis/discussion of the journey and how it relates to the character and the theme is generally understandable, but it is limited or uneven. The writer's ideas are expressed clearly with a few errors in syntax and/or diction.

A **4** essay is not an adequate response to the prompt. The writer's analysis/discussion of the journey and how it relates to character and theme indicates a misunderstanding, an oversimplification, or a misrepresentation of the chosen literary work. The writer may use evidence that is not appropriate or not sufficient to support his or her thesis.

A **3** essay is a lower 4 because it is even less effective in addressing the journey and how it relates to character and theme. It is also less mature in its syntax and organization.

A **2** essay indicates little success in speaking to the prompt. The writer may misread the question, choose an unacceptable literary work, only summarize the selection, never develop the required analysis, or simply ignore the prompt and write about another topic altogether. (*Note:* No matter how good a summary is, it will never rate more than a 2.)

A **1** essay is a lower 2 because it is even more simplistic, disorganized, off topic, and lacking in control of language.

## Timing and Planning the Free-Response Essay



This essay is the real challenge of the exam. Keep in mind that with the other two essay questions, half the job was done for you; the material was limited and provided for you.

But now you are faced with the blank page that you must fill. Therefore, you *must* plan this essay carefully and completely. With this in mind, here's a workable strategy:

- 1–3 minutes working the prompt. (At this point, you might even chart the prompt.)
- 3–5 minutes choosing your work. (You should mentally run through two or three works that might be appropriate.) This is a crucial step for laying the foundation for your essay.
- 10 minutes for brainstorming, charting, mapping, outlining, and so on the specifics you plan to use in your essay. (Remember, a vague, general, unsupported essay will cost you points.)
- 20 minutes to write your essay based on your preparation.
- 3 minutes for proofreading.

## Working the Prompt from the Diagnostic/Master Exam



Before you read the prompt, immediately cover the list of suggested works. There are several good reasons for this:

- It requires time to read the list.
- Chances are you will have read very few works on the list. If you are like many students, this could make you feel insecure and rattle your confidence.
- If you are familiar with a work or two, you may be predisposed to use the work to answer the question even if it is not necessarily your best choice. You may find yourself considering a work that you would not have considered if it were not listed, and you may find yourself taking precious time to fit that choice unsuccessfully to the prompt.

Here is the PROMPT:

**Often in literature, a literal or figurative journey is a significant factor in the development of a character or the meaning of the work. Choose a full-length work and write a well-organized essay in which you discuss the literal and/or figurative nature of the journey and how it affects characterization and theme. You may choose from the list below or another full-length work of literary merit.**

*As I Lay Dying*  
*Jane Eyre*  
*The Odyssey*  
*Don Quixote*  
*Candide*  
*A Streetcar Named Desire*  
*A Passage to India*  
*Gulliver's Travels*  
*No Exit*  
*The Kite Runner*

*Tom Jones*  
*Heart of Darkness*  
*Moby Dick*  
*The Sun Also Rises*  
*The Grapes of Wrath*  
*The Stranger*  
*Ulysses*  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*  
*Obasan*  
*Twelfth Night*



### Notating the Prompt

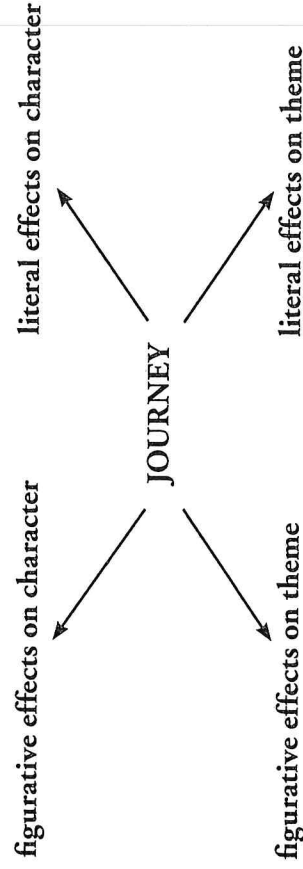
We recommend that you chart or map the prompt. This is a simple visualization of your task. Before you look at our samples, you might want to try charting or mapping the prompt on your own.

Following is a sample chart:

*Jane Eyre*

	JOURNEY	EFFECT ON CHARACTER	EFFECT ON THEME
LITERAL			
FIGURATIVE			

Here is a sample map:



Following is a sample topic outline:

#### Journey

- Literal effect
  - character
  - theme
- Figurative effect
  - character
  - theme

#### Your Turn

Carefully read and highlight the following prompt.

**Frequently, the tension in a literary work is created by the conflict between a character and society. Choose a full-length literary work and discuss the nature of the conflict, its effect on the character, on society, and on the resulting thematic implications.**

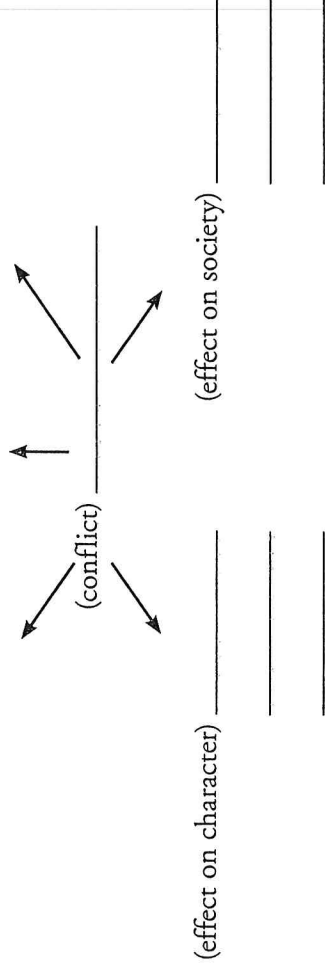
A. **Construct a chart** that addresses the requirements of the prompt.

*Title of literary work:*

	NATURE OF CONFLICT	EFFECT OF CONFLICT
ON CHARACTER		
ON SOCIETY		
ON THEMATIC IMPLICATIONS		

B. Using the same literary work you chose for the chart, **create a map**.

(character) \_\_\_\_\_ (society) \_\_\_\_\_ (thematic) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_



C. With the same literary work and prompt in mind, **construct an outline**.

Conflict

Nature of conflict

- On character:
- On society:

Effect of conflict

- On character:
- On society:

Thematic implications

- On character:
- On society:

When you provide the specifics, either mentally or by writing them down, you will ensure that you have addressed all parts of the prompt. This also will provide the basic structure of your essay.



*Note:* Although it may feel awkward and contrived at first, if you actually practice this technique, it will become automatic and help you to immediately get into the writing of your essay.



Now that you are familiar with the prompt, take a few moments to think about works that might be appropriate for this question. One or two will immediately pop into your mind. Mentally examine them for scenes or details that you might be able to use. *If you can't think of specifics, abandon this choice.*

If you wish, now take a look at the list of suggested works, because:

- You may find your choice there, and you will feel very validated.
- You may see a different work by the same author, which may also boost your confidence.
- You might see another work or author you recognize you had not considered that could possibly spark a better response to the prompt.

**This process should only take a minute or so.**

*Do this now.* Spend 8–10 minutes working your choice to fit the requirements of the prompt. For example, prior to the exam, you will have prepared a cross section of works from various genres, time periods, and literary movements. Since these are works with depth, you will be able to take your basic scene or references and modify them to suit the task of the given prompt.

Using *Hamlet* as an example, let's assume you reviewed the graveyard scene prior to the exam. This scene would be appropriate to illustrate your thoughts on such varied prompts as:

- The use of humor—the gravedigger.
- The role of a minor character—Horatio.
- The concept of death as the great leveler—motif.
- Use of ritual—funeral.
- The impact of a character *not* seen in the work—Yorick.
- The use of coincidence or irony in the work—Ophelia's grave.
- The use of setting to develop theme or character—"To be or not to be."

You get the point. Obviously, you could not answer a question about the effectiveness of a work's conclusion by using this scene, which is exactly why you prepare *several* different literary examples.



We know that Shakespeare is so universal that any work could be used to answer almost any free-response question. Therefore, we urge you to prepare at least one Shakespearean play as a "safe" work.

There is another reason to spend several minutes planning your essay. Frequently, your first responses and examples are the obvious and common ones. This is not to say that you could not write an adequate essay using these. But, if they came to you this quickly, they probably also came to many thousands of other students taking the exam. It is usually more challenging and rewarding to find a unique focus for your essay. For example: choosing the gravedigger's scene in *Hamlet* rather than the "To be or not to be" scene may reveal a more creative thinker.

Sometimes, as you are planning, you realize that your work will answer only part of the prompt and that it would be better to switch to another work. If you have prepared well prior to the test, you will be able to do this without taking up much time. Sometimes it's better to abandon your initial choice in favor of the second and more productive one. This is why you have not yet begun to write.

## Developing the Opening Paragraph



*Now you are ready to write.* Remember, your opening paragraph is the one that raises the expectations of the reader and sets the tone of your essay. Spend time on your first paragraph to maximize your score.

Make certain that your topic is very clear to the reader. This reinforces the idea that you fully understand what is expected of you and what you will communicate to the reader. Generally, identify both the text and the author in this first paragraph.

*Do this now.* Take 5 minutes and write your opening paragraph for this prompt. Write quickly, referring to your notes.

Let's check what you've written:

- Have you included the author and title?
- Have you addressed the literal and figurative journeys?
- Have you addressed characterization and theme?

Here are three sample opening paragraphs that address each of the above criteria.

### A

"There was no possibility of taking a walk that day" says young Jane in Chapter One of Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*. Little did she know that her very existence would evolve from her personal odyssey as she journeyed from Gateshead to Lowood to Thornfield and beyond; from child to adolescent to woman. This literal and figurative journey enables Brontë to develop both the character and the theme of her work.

### B

Up the hill, down the street, across the road from cafe to cafe, the characters in Ernest Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, wander interminably. Hemingway employs this aimless journey to reveal the lost nature of his characters and his theme of the search for meaning and direction in their post-World War I existence.

### C

In *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, a literal journey from England to Africa becomes a nightmare of realization and epiphany for the main character, Marlowe. Conrad develops his themes through Marlowe's observations and experiences on his figurative journey from innocence to corruption, idealism to cynicism, and optimism to despair.

*Note:* These three introductory paragraphs identify the author and the title and clearly indicate an understanding of the prompt. Let's note what is different about each.

Sample **A** begins with an appropriate, direct quotation. It clearly delineates the two types of journeys and their relationship to the character. The writer indicates an understanding of the difference between literal and figurative interpretation.

Sample **B** has a clear writer's voice. The writer is not afraid to be judgmental. The tone of the essay is apparent and sustained.

Sample **C** alludes to the content of the body of the essay and touches on vague generalities. However, the maturity of the vocabulary and thought indicate the writer's understanding of Conrad's complex themes and their relationship to the prompt.

*Note:* There are many other types of opening paragraphs that could also do the job. The paragraphs above are just a few samples. Does your opening paragraph resemble any

of these samples? When you write the body of your essay, take only 15–20 minutes. Time yourself and try your best to finish within that time frame.

## Developing the Body of the Essay

Time to pump some mental iron and to firm up and tone those flabby ideas and turn them into examples of intellectual fitness.

### What should I include in the body of the free-response essay?

1. Obviously, this is where you present your interpretation and the points you wish to make that are related to the prompt.
  - Use specific references and details from the chosen work.
  - Incorporate direct quotations when possible.
  - Place quotation marks around those words or phrases taken directly from the work.
3. Use connective tissue in your essay to establish adherence to the question.
  - Use the repetition of key ideas in the prompt and in your opening paragraph.
  - Try using “echo words” (i.e., synonyms such as *journey/wanderings/travels* or *figurative/symbolic/metaphoric*).
  - Use transitions from one paragraph to the next.

To understand the process, carefully read the following sample paragraphs. Each illustrates an aspect of the prompt. Notice the specific references and the connective tissue.

#### A

At Gateshead, despite its material comforts, Jane was an orphaned outcast who felt “like a discord.” She was, like Cinderella, abused by her cousins and aunt and nurtured only by Bessie, a servant. Jane’s immaturity and rebellious nature cause her to be jealous and vengeful which culminates in a violent confrontation with her repulsive cousin, John. Her subsequent eviction from Gateshead forces her to embark on a journey that will affect her forever. The stark privations of Lowood humble Jane and open her to the true riches of friendship with Helen Burns. It is here she learns the academic, religious, and social skills that will enable her to move on to her destiny at Thornfield.

#### B

Throughout the novel Jake escorts the reader on the journeys that become the only purpose the group exhibits. The trip to San Fermin for the fiesta is also a journey to hell, away from civilization and morality. The fiesta “explodes” and for seven days any behavior is acceptable, for there is no accountability during this time. No one “pays the bill,” yet. Brett is worshiped as a pagan idol; garlic is strung around her neck, and men drink to her powers. She is compared to Circe, and, indeed, she turns her companions into swine as they fight over her. This trip to the fiesta reinforces the lack of spirituality and direction that is a theme of the novel.

#### C

Referring to the map of the Congo, Marlowe states that “the snake had charmed me.” This primal description prepares us for the inevitable journey up the river that will change the very core of his character. The snake implies temptation, and Marlowe is seduced by the mysteries of Africa and his desire to meet Kurtz in the interior. He is too



naive and pure to anticipate the abominations that await him at the inner station. Like a descent into hell, the journey progresses. The encounters with Fresleven, the workers without rivets, the pilgrims shooting into the jungle, all foreshadow Marlowe's changing understanding of the absurdity of life and the flawed nature of man. Only when he is totally aware of "the horror, the horror" can he journey back to "another dark place of the universe," London, to see the Intended and to corrupt his own values for her sake.

Let's examine these three body paragraphs.

Sample **A** is about *Jane Eyre*. It addresses one aspect of the prompt—Jane's character at the beginning of the journey—and continues with the first major change in her life. The writer demonstrates familiarity with the novel through concrete details and quotations. Theme is implied and leads the reader to anticipate further development in the rest of the body of the essay.

Sample **B** refers to *The Sun Also Rises*. This paragraph uses a single incident to develop the discussion of the journey as it affects character and theme. The writer includes very specific details of the San Fermin fiesta to support comments about Brett and Jake. The integration of these details is presented in a cohesive, mature style.

Sample **C** delves into *Heart of Darkness*. This paragraph is a philosophical approach, which assumes the reader is familiar with the novel. It focuses on theme and how the development of the character is used to illustrate that theme. The ending of the paragraph presents an insight that invites the reader to "stay tuned."

*Do this now.* Write the body of your essay. Time yourself. Allow 15–20 minutes to complete this task.

## Sample Student Essays

Here are two actual student essays that are followed by a rubric and comments on each essay.

### Student Essay A

The journey taken by Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* exemplifies the journey that is a very common feature in many works of literature. This journey is not a commonplace journey; it is one that brings about development and change in the story's main character. In *The Awakening*, the spiritual journey that Edna takes changes the way she thinks, acts, and lives. The ramifications of her journey change her life.

The story takes place in New Orleans around the turn of the century. The women of society were treated as possessions, either of their fathers or their husbands, or even of their religion. The story's protagonist, Edna, is introduced as the respectable wife. She is a good mother and is faithful to her husband. The family vacations for the summer in Grand Isle. While there, Edna befriends Robert who every summer devotes himself to being an attendant to one of the married women, Edna being his current choice. While there, she undergoes a series of "awakenings" which begin her journey. One such push was Edna's learning to swim. Although she was previously afraid of the water and of swimming, one day she tried, and is successful. Her newfound ability signifies the steps she is taking towards no longer being a possession. It is one of the first signs that Edna is ready

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to break free and to be her own person. The water gives her a sense of freedom, and she relishes this sensation.

Edna's growing love for Robert alerts her of the journey upon which she has unknowingly embarked. After Robert leaves, giving very short notice, she misses him tremendously. She realizes that she is in love with him but has no such love for her husband, Leonce. While Robert gives into her every whim, Leonce only cares about Edna as if she were his possession. He does not consider her feelings and emotions, only his own. He leaves the family often to go into the city for work, sending candy and chocolates to Edna and her children in order to compensate for his absence. He constantly neglects Edna's emotional needs, and as a result, intensifies the strength of her journey. However, Leonce is not the only person who sees Edna merely as a possession. Even Robert, who is in love with her, feels that Edna belongs to Leonce. Because he knows that she cannot be his, Robert refuses to let their relationship progress any further than it has, and the only way for him to achieve this is to go away and cut off contact with Edna.

When the family returns to their home in New Orleans, Edna is not content with her life and begins to neglect performing some of her expected activities and duties, such as entertaining the wives of her husband's clients. Edna's refusal to accompany her husband on a business trip is the pinnacle of her journey. Leonce is shocked and appalled by her noncompliance, but he feels that she is going through a phase and will soon come to her senses.

While her husband is gone, Edna's children are sent to live with their grandmother. During this time, Edna is free and independent. She meets a variety of new people who she begins to spend time with. One of these people is Alcee Arobin, who becomes her lover. This relationship is important in Edna's journey because it represents a further rift from her previous life as a possession. More and more, Edna becomes her own person. Moreover, although he tries to make her his own possession as well, Edna refuses to let Alcee have the upper hand in their relationship. She refuses to let anyone control her life ever again. She even goes so far as to close up her house and rent a much smaller place to dwell in. Edna's actions come as a shock to many people, especially her husband, but she is really just trying to assert her individuality. However, no one understands what she is going through. In fact, many people, including her husband, blame her behavior on mental illness. Edna realizes that she cannot continue to live in this manner.

At the novel's conclusion, Edna decides to commit suicide. She swims into the ocean and drowns herself. It is fitting that she chooses the ocean, the place where she feels she has the most freedom, to end the journey. Edna decides that she would rather not live at all than to live a life where she cannot be her own person.

### Student Essay B

It is easy to interpret the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, as a denouncement of white colonization, or simply as a detailed portrayal of African culture. But that would be all too banal; it has already been said and done by many authors. What makes this novel distinctive is the development and depiction of Okonkwo's journey through life and how his journey effects the novel's themes.

Given Okonkwo's rugged personality, he encounters many conflicts on his journey to self-awareness. Okonkwo clashes with his father, his wives, his children,

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his village, and perhaps every other character, but his greatest struggle is with himself. It seems as if Okonkwo's enemy is his father's flaws, but in reality, Okonkwo's hidden enemy is his fear of his father's reflection upon himself. Okonkwo spends his whole life on a journey away from the values of his father, so much up to the point where he ruins his life as well as the lives of those around him. His tragic flaw is his obsessive aversion to his father's laid back character. Okonkwo is so engulfed by his life's mission to become a rejection of his father's character, that he fails to see Unoka's positive traits such as tenderness, wisdom, and a passion for life, which Okonkwo lacks.

Even though Okonkwo is the protagonist in this book, he is also the antagonist; clearly, he is on a trip to disaster. He has not journeyed inside himself to understand what makes him act the way he does. He is extremely rash and explosive and does not think twice about throwing a fatal punch. He foolishly thinks that his aggressiveness is the only way for a man to act; it is this misconception that ultimately ruins him. Unfortunately for Okonkwo, he never realizes his flaw, and in the end, it is as if he cannot flee his father's reflection, for just like his father, he dies with shame and disgrace.

He had the ambition; he had the intelligence; he had the passion; but he had all of these for the wrong reasons. Perhaps Things Fall Apart portrays Okonkwo's lack of development rather than his development through time. From his early youth he forms this strong aversion to weakness and ineptitude, and this controls all his actions throughout his life. In actuality, the fact that he is totally ruled by this fear of ineptitude underscores how internally weak Okonkwo is. In the end, when he realizes that there is no possible way to triumph, that he cannot control people with his violent actions, and that he cannot control his fate, what does he do? He gives up and commits the most cowardly act of suicide.

## Rating the Student Essays



Let's take a look at ranking comments about each of these essays. Student Essay A is a borderline high-range essay for several reasons:

- It addresses all aspects of the prompt.
- It is highly detailed (lines 13–14, 25–26, 34–35).
- It demonstrates strong topic adherence (lines 5–6, 14–15, 20, 36–37, 50–51).
- There is strong integration of specifics to support the thesis (lines 16–17, 29–32, 42–43).
- There is perceptive character analysis (lines 33–36, 49–51).
- There is clear linear development of the essay (lines 9, 13–14, 33, 39, 48).
- The essay is frequently repetitive and needs echo words.
- There are some syntax and diction errors.

This is an example of a strong midrange essay which could make the jump into the high-range area because of its organization, its use of detail, and its insights. It's obvious that the writer thoroughly understands the work and presents various specifics to support the thesis. The diction and syntax are, at times, not as mature as would be found on more sophisticated essays.

*“Peer review groups unite the class as they begin to form a writing community that is open to ideas, criticism, and revision.”*

—Sandi F.  
AP teacher

Student Essay B is a basic midrange essay for the following reasons:

- It does begin to address the basic tasks of the prompt.
- It identifies character and theme.
- It refers to the character’s journeys but does not really develop any of them (paragraphs 2–3).
- There are many generalizations which need more specific support (lines 10–16, 25–27).
- The essay loses its clear connection to the prompt at times (paragraph 4).
- The diction and syntax, although adequate, lack a maturity seen in higher-level papers.

This lower, midrange essay demonstrates that the writer understands the prompt. It does contain several perceptive insights which are unevenly developed. This is obviously a first draft in need of further revision. The essay would have benefited from more thorough preparation of the work prior to the exam. As it stands, it relies too heavily on generalizations.

## Final Comments



**Warning!** Although the free-response essay may appear to be the easiest and most accessible on the exam, it is fraught with danger. The worst danger is relying on vague references and general statements that are not supported by specific details or lines. In addition, you have to develop the organizational pattern of the essay and control its progression. All too often the essays read like capsule summaries of the plots.

Your lifesaver in this essay situation is preparation. We say this again because it bears repeating:



- Review full-length works you’ve read during the year.
- Choose a minimum of five works you’ve connected with.
- Classify the five works to ensure a broad spectrum of types, literary movements, and themes.
- Isolate several *pivotal* scenes, moments, or episodes from each of the five works and examine the suitability of those scenes for a variety of questions.
- Select quotations and details from these pivotal scenes.
- If necessary, reread only the pivotal scenes before you take the exam.

## Rapid Review

- Remember the pitfalls of the free-response essay: vagueness and plot summary.
- Choose AP-level full-length novels or plays that you thoroughly recall and understand.
- Generally, use this year’s material.
- Familiarize yourself with sample free-response prompts.
- Anticipate free-response prompts.
- Develop specific review materials for several full-length works.
- Practice applying your knowledge to a variety of prompts.
- Highlight the prompt to make certain you are addressing the requirements of the question.

- Do not waste time looking at the suggested works. Choose from your own memory bank.
- Plan the essay thoroughly before you begin writing.
- Briefly chart your response. Fill in with concrete details and quotes, if possible.
- Write an engaging opening paragraph that reflects the question's requirements.
- Stay on topic.
- *Avoid plot summary.*
- Include transitions and echo words.
- Review our models and rubrics for self-evaluation.
- Share your ideas with others.