

MahadtheMentor Road to a **5**; AP English Literature and Composition

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AP English Literature and Composition Exam Breakdown

Exam Format Overview

Section	Question Type	# of Questions	Exam Weighting	Timing
Section I	Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQ)	55	45%	60 minutes
Section II	Free-Response Questions (FRQ)	3 essays	55%	120 minutes (40 min. recommended per essay)

Total Exam Time: 3 hours

Section I: Multiple-Choice Questions

Section I has 55 multiple-choice questions and lasts 60 minutes — it counts for 45% of the total exam score. The section includes five sets of 8 to 13 questions, with each set preceded by a passage of prose fiction or poetry of varying difficulty. Each exam will include at least two prose fiction passages and at least two poetry passages, drawn from a range of time periods (with more 20th-century and contemporary texts than pre-20th-century texts). No calculator is needed.

Section II: Free Response

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Question	Type	Points	Stimulus	Notes
FRQ 1	Poetry Analysis	6	Poem of ~100–400 words	Analyze how the poet uses poetic elements and techniques to develop a complex aspect of the poem.
FRQ 2	Prose Fiction Analysis	6	Prose passage of ~600–800 words	Analyze how the author uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex aspect of the passage.
FRQ 3	Literary Argument	6	Concept + list of ~40 works	Choose a work of fiction (from the list or your own reading) and analyze how the concept contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.

Note: The three FRQs always appear in the same order — Poetry Analysis, Prose Fiction Analysis, and Literary Argument — but the specific texts and prompts change every year. The prompt wording is highly stable: the only italicized parts change between administrations. Budget about 40 minutes per essay, leaving a few minutes to plan a clear thesis and a few minutes to revise.

Unit Weighting and Big Idea Focus

Unit	Big Idea Focus	Exam Weight (MCQ)
Unit 1: Short Fiction I	Character (CHR), Setting (SET), Structure (STR), Narration (NAR), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	42–49% (Short Fiction)
Unit 2: Poetry I	Character (CHR), Structure (STR), Figurative Language (FIG), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	36–45% (Poetry)
Unit 3: Longer Fiction or Drama I	Character (CHR), Setting (SET), Structure (STR), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	15–18% (Longer Fiction or Drama)
Unit 4: Short Fiction II	Character (CHR), Setting (SET), Structure (STR), Narration (NAR), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	42–49% (Short Fiction)
Unit 5: Poetry II	Structure (STR), Figurative Language (FIG), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	36–45% (Poetry)

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Unit	Big Idea Focus	Exam Weight (MCQ)
Unit 6: Longer Fiction or Drama II	Character (CHR), Structure (STR), Narration (NAR), Figurative Language (FIG), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	15–18% (Longer Fiction or Drama)
Unit 7: Short Fiction III	Character (CHR), Setting (SET), Structure (STR), Narration (NAR), Figurative Language (FIG), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	42–49% (Short Fiction)
Unit 8: Poetry III	Structure (STR), Figurative Language (FIG), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	36–45% (Poetry)
Unit 9: Longer Fiction or Drama III	Character (CHR), Structure (STR), Narration (NAR), Literary Argumentation (LAN)	15–18% (Longer Fiction or Drama)

How Course Skills Are Assessed

Skill Category	MCQ Weighting	FRQ Weighting	Description
1: Character	16–20%	Embedded across all FRQs	Explain the function of character.
2: Setting	3–6%	Embedded across all FRQs	Explain the function of setting.
3: Structure	16–20%	Embedded across all FRQs	Explain the function of plot and structure.
4: Narration	21–26%	Embedded across all FRQs	Explain the function of the narrator or speaker.
5: Figurative Language (Words)	10–13%	Embedded across all FRQs	Explain the function of word choice, imagery, and symbols.
6: Figurative Language (Compare)	10–13%	Embedded across all FRQs	Explain the function of comparison.
7: Literary Argumentation	10–13%	Drives all 3 FRQs	Develop textually substantiated arguments about interpretations of part or all of a text.

Big Ideas Assessed

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- Character (CHR)
- Setting (SET)
- Structure (STR)
- Narration (NAR)
- Figurative Language (FIG)
- Literary Argumentation (LAN)

Common Task Verbs in Free-Response Questions

Task Verb	Definition
Analyze	Examine methodically and in detail the structure of the topic of the question for purposes of interpretation and explanation.
Choose	Select a literary work from among provided choices.
Read	Look at or view printed directions and provided passages.

The N-F-I Method

Notice–Focus–Interpret is a three-step reading routine for working through a prose passage.

The way I'd describe it: it's the Chief Reader's antidote to the most common AP Lit failure mode, which is students staring at a rich passage, picking the first interesting thing they see, and writing about that one thing. N-F-I forces you to slow down and separate three moves that students otherwise smash together.

Notice is just inventory. You read the passage and list (or annotate) everything that catches your eye: a strange word, a shift in tone, a repeated image, an odd piece of syntax. The deliberate refusal to filter at this stage is the point; you can't pick the best evidence if you only ever generate three options.

Focus is the filter. Now you bring in a controlling question — on the exam, that's the prompt itself ("McElroy's complex experience"). You look back at your inventory and ask which of those noticed details actually speak to the question. The rest get set aside.

Interpret is the argument. Given the focused subset, what is the evidence saying? This is where commentary lives: explaining how those details add up to a defensible reading of the passage.

The report is also careful to say that the process is circular, not linear. If your interpretation feels thin, you go back and Notice more; if your focus shifts mid-essay, you re-filter.

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N-F-I Example:

N: Notice

First, notice details that feel weird, repeated, or emotionally loaded:

- The speaker says she is “home again,” but also says the “heart” is barely present.
- Summer, grapes, vines, and the arbor keep coming back.
- The childhood arbor changes from something lush and full to something rotten and broken.
- Home is described through images of disappearance, blocked streets, warnings, black clothing, vacant lots, and the Gateway Arch.
- The ending connects “home,” “stranger,” “words,” and “poems.”

F: Focus

Now focus on the details that connect directly to the prompt: **the speaker’s complex experience of returning home.**

The strongest pattern is this:

Home is familiar, but no longer fully accessible.

So I’d focus on three techniques:

1. **Repetition of “home”**
She keeps saying she is home, but each return feels less certain.
2. **Changing imagery of grapes/vines/arbor**
Childhood memories are lush and physical, but the present version of home is decayed and altered.
3. **Contrasts between memory and present reality**
The speaker remembers summer, cousins, vows to return, and childhood streets, but now she feels like a stranger.

I: Interpret

Now turn those observations into meaning.

Interpretation:

McElroy presents returning home as both intimate and alienating. The speaker loves the place because it holds childhood memory, family, and language, but she also feels guilty for leaving and estranged from the version of home that still exists. Home is not just a place she returns to. It becomes something transformed by time, absence, memory, and language.

Example thesis

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In “Monologue for Saint Louis,” McElroy uses repeated images of home, decaying natural imagery, and contrasts between childhood memory and present reality to show that the speaker’s return is both loving and unsettling: she is drawn back to the place that shaped her, but she can no longer fully belong to it.

Popular Works to Know

Work	Author	Why It's Useful
Invisible Man	Ralph Ellison	The single most-listed FRQ 3 work in history. Hits identity, race, ideology, alienation, and metafiction, so almost any prompt routes through it.
Wuthering Heights	Emily Brontë	Obsession, revenge, social class, framed narration, family inheritance. Strong fit for "complex" love and morally ambiguous protagonist prompts.
Great Expectations	Charles Dickens	Class ambition, self-deception, retrospective narration, unexpected benefactor, unrequited love. Great for prompts about a character who changes (or thinks they have), inheritance reshaping identity, or the past returning to claim the present.
The Great Gatsby	F. Scott Fitzgerald	American Dream, illusion vs. reality, unreliable narration, setting as symbol. A workhorse for class, longing, and reinvention prompts.
Heart of Darkness	Joseph Conrad	Journey, complicity, moral ambiguity, frame narration. Great for prompts about a corrupting place or a protagonist confronting darkness.
Crime and Punishment	Fyodor Dostoevsky	Guilt, conscience, ideology, urban setting, redemption arc. Durable across any moral-conflict or interior-monologue prompt.
Jane Eyre	Charlotte Brontë	Bildungsroman, gender, class, religion, "madwoman" subplot. Easy to redirect to identity, autonomy, or unreliable narrator prompts.
Beloved	Toni Morrison	Memory, history, motherhood, trauma, the supernatural. Especially powerful for the memory-themed prompts College Board has revisited.

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Their Eyes Were Watching God	Zora Neale Hurston	Voice, autonomy, marriage, dialect, place. Flexible for character-arc, identity, and "journey to selfhood" prompts.
The Scarlet Letter	Nathaniel Hawthorne	Sin, public vs. private self, symbol, hypocrisy. The original "complex protagonist" essay engine.
Hamlet	William Shakespeare	Delay, doubt, performance, family, revenge. The default Shakespeare for almost any internal-conflict prompt.
King Lear	William Shakespeare	Blindness, power, parent-child reversal, madness. The Shakespeare to reach for on prompts about deception or family.
Song of Solomon	Toni Morrison	Naming, ancestry, flight as motif, masculine identity. Pairs with prompts about heritage, escape, or the past shaping the present.
A Streetcar Named Desire	Tennessee Williams	Illusion vs. reality, class collision, fragility, sexuality. Drama slot that works for "character clinging to a fiction" prompts.
The Awakening	Kate Chopin	Female autonomy, social constraint, awakening as motif, ambiguous ending. Built for prompts on individuality vs. society.
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man	James Joyce	Bildungsroman, religion, vocation, voice maturing across the novel. Great for artistic awakening and "leaving home" prompts.
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn	Mark Twain	Friendship across race, journey structure, moral education, dialect. Useful for prompts about a character's ethical growth.
As I Lay Dying	William Faulkner	Multiple narrators, family dysfunction, journey, grief. The go-to for prompts about narrative perspective or a chaotic family.
Death of a Salesman	Arthur Miller	Failed American Dream, memory intrusion, father-son conflict. Drama option for prompts on disillusionment or self-deception.
Frankenstein	Mary Shelley	Creation, responsibility, monstrosity, frame narration. Strong for prompts about a character's actions producing unintended consequences.

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Things Fall Apart	Chinua Achebe	Colonialism, masculinity, tradition vs. change, tragic protagonist. The non-Western workhorse, and unbeatable for prompts on cultural collision.
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Unit-by-Unit Review

A condensed walkthrough of every unit on the AP English Literature and Composition exam, drawn directly from the College Board Course and Exam Description (Effective Fall 2024). Use this section to spot-check your weakest units — the percentages reflect MCQ weighting, which the CED publishes by category (Short Fiction, Poetry, Longer Fiction or Drama) rather than per unit.

Unit 1: Short Fiction I (42–49% of MCQ — Short Fiction)

Unit 1 establishes the foundations of literary analysis through short stories. Students learn to identify what specific textual details reveal about a character’s perspective and motives, how a setting is conveyed through detail, how plot orders events, and how a narrator or speaker controls what readers can see. The unit also introduces the building block of literary argument: writing a defensible claim about a text and supporting it with the right textual evidence. Most students at this stage struggle less with the reading and more with crafting a claim that requires defending — work in this unit on paragraph-level claims pays off all year.

Skills covered:

- 1.A Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character’s perspective, and that character’s motives.
- 2.A Identify and describe specific textual details that convey or reveal a setting.
- 3.A Identify and describe how plot orders events in a narrative.
- 3.B Explain the function of a particular sequence of events in a plot.
- 4.A Identify and describe the narrator or speaker of a text.
- 4.B Identify and explain the function of point of view in a narrative.
- 7.A Develop a paragraph that includes 1) a claim that requires defense with evidence from the text and 2) the evidence itself.

Unit 2: Poetry I (36–45% of MCQ — Poetry)

Unit 2 introduces poetic analysis and asks students to slow down and read line-by-line. Students examine how the structure of a poem (lines, stanzas, contrasts) shapes meaning, how specific words and phrases function in a poem, and how figures of speech like simile and metaphor create meaning. The poetry essay (FRQ 1) historically scores lower than the other essays — the consistent difference is that students rush past structural patterns. Practice paraphrasing each stanza in your own words before claiming what the poem “does.”

Skills covered:

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- 1.A Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- 3.C Explain the function of structure in a text.
- 3.D Explain the function of contrasts within a text.
- 5.B Explain the function of specific words and phrases in a text.
- 6.A Identify and explain the function of a simile.
- 6.B Identify and explain the function of a metaphor.
- 7.A Develop a paragraph that includes 1) a claim that requires defense with evidence from the text and 2) the evidence itself.

Unit 3: Longer Fiction or Drama I (15–18% of MCQ — Longer Fiction or Drama)

Unit 3 stretches analysis across a longer work — usually a novel, novella, or play of the teacher's choosing. Students examine how a character changes (or doesn't) over the course of an extended narrative, how setting carries values across many chapters, and how significant events and conflicts function in a long plot. This is also the first unit where students write full essays with a thesis, line of reasoning, and well-developed commentary — exactly what FRQ 3 (Literary Argument) on the exam will require.

Skills covered:

- 1.A Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- 1.B Explain the function of a character changing or remaining unchanged.
- 2.A Identify and describe specific textual details that convey or reveal a setting.
- 3.E Explain the function of a significant event or related set of significant events in a plot.
- 3.F Explain the function of conflict in a text.
- 7.A Develop a paragraph that includes 1) a claim that requires defense with evidence from the text and 2) the evidence itself.
- 7.B Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.
- 7.C Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.
- 7.D Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.
- 7.E Demonstrate control over the elements of composition to communicate clearly.

Unit 4: Short Fiction II (42–49% of MCQ — Short Fiction)

Unit 4 returns to short fiction at a higher level of complexity. Students study contrasting characters, the nuances of relationships, and how setting actively shapes a narrative (rather than just providing backdrop). Narration becomes a sharper tool: students examine the diction and syntax that reveal a narrator or speaker's perspective. On the writing side, students move from paragraph claims to full essays with clear lines of reasoning — practicing exactly the FRQ 2 (Prose Fiction Analysis) skillset.

Skills covered:

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- 1.A Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- 1.C Explain the function of contrasting characters.
- 1.D Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- 2.B Explain the function of setting in a narrative.
- 2.C Describe the relationship between a character and a setting.
- 3.A Identify and describe how plot orders events in a narrative.
- 3.D Explain the function of contrasts within a text.
- 4.A Identify and describe the narrator or speaker of a text.
- 4.B Identify and explain the function of point of view in a narrative.
- 4.C Identify and describe details, diction, or syntax in a text that reveal a narrator's or speaker's perspective.
- 7.B Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.
- 7.C Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.
- 7.D Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.

Unit 5: Poetry II (36–45% of MCQ — Poetry)

Unit 5 builds on poetic interpretation by focusing on how word choice, imagery, and comparison shape meaning. Students learn to distinguish literal from figurative meaning, identify imagery as patterned detail, and explain the function of metaphor, personification, and allusion. This is also where the writing skill set gets sharper: students focus on selecting the most relevant evidence and demonstrating control over composition — the same line-of-reasoning and elements-of-composition rubric rows that score the AP poetry essay.

Skills covered:

- 3.C Explain the function of structure in a text.
- 5.A Distinguish between the literal and figurative meanings of words and phrases.
- 5.B Explain the function of specific words and phrases in a text.
- 5.D Identify and explain the function of an image or imagery.
- 6.B Identify and explain the function of a metaphor.
- 6.C Identify and explain the function of personification.
- 6.D Identify and explain the function of an allusion.
- 7.B Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.
- 7.C Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.
- 7.D Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.
- 7.E Demonstrate control over the elements of composition to communicate clearly.

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Unit 6: Longer Fiction or Drama II (15–18% of MCQ — Longer Fiction or Drama)

Unit 6 explores complexity in longer works — apparent inconsistencies that turn out to be intentional craft. Students analyze characters whose actions and choices reveal contradictions, plots whose sequences are interrupted, and narrators whose reliability is in question. Symbol enters the toolkit. Writing focuses on developing a defensible thesis with commentary that explains how the evidence supports the line of reasoning — not just lists it.

Skills covered:

- 1.A Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- 1.C Explain the function of contrasting characters.
- 1.E Explain how a character's own choices, actions, and speech reveal complexities in that character, and explain the function of those complexities.
- 3.A Identify and describe how plot orders events in a narrative.
- 3.B Explain the function of a particular sequence of events in a plot.
- 3.D Explain the function of contrasts within a text.
- 4.C Identify and describe details, diction, or syntax in a text that reveal a narrator's or speaker's perspective.
- 4.D Explain how a narrator's reliability affects a narrative.
- 5.C Identify and explain the function of a symbol.
- 7.B Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.
- 7.C Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.
- 7.D Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.

Unit 7: Short Fiction III (42–49% of MCQ — Short Fiction)

Unit 7 looks at how short fiction engages with experiences, institutions, and social structures. Students examine sudden changes in a narrative — character epiphanies, shifts in setting, manipulations of plot pacing, contradictions from a narrator — as deliberate moves that shape interpretation. Symbol, imagery, simile, and personification are all in play. By this point students should be writing complete, well-structured analytical essays with strong evidence selection.

Skills covered:

- 1.B Explain the function of a character changing or remaining unchanged.
- 1.D Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- 2.B Explain the function of setting in a narrative.
- 2.C Describe the relationship between a character and a setting.
- 3.A Identify and describe how plot orders events in a narrative.
- 3.B Explain the function of a particular sequence of events in a plot.
- 4.D Explain how a narrator's reliability affects a narrative.
- 5.C Identify and explain the function of a symbol.

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- 5.D Identify and explain the function of an image or imagery.
- 6.A Identify and explain the function of a simile.
- 6.C Identify and explain the function of personification.
- 7.B Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.
- 7.C Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.
- 7.D Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.

Unit 8: Poetry III (36–45% of MCQ — Poetry)

Unit 8 is the deepest cut on poetic interpretation. Students examine ambiguities of language, irony, paradox, and juxtaposition — how a poem’s parts can complicate or even contradict one another. Symbol and allusion get a heavier focus here. The writing emphasis is on the highest-band rubric moves: a defensible thesis, evidence that genuinely advances the line of reasoning, commentary that connects evidence to thesis, and clear, controlled prose.

Skills covered:

- 3.C Explain the function of structure in a text.
- 3.D Explain the function of contrasts within a text.
- 5.B Explain the function of specific words and phrases in a text.
- 5.C Identify and explain the function of a symbol.
- 6.B Identify and explain the function of a metaphor.
- 6.D Identify and explain the function of an allusion.
- 7.B Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.
- 7.C Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.
- 7.D Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.
- 7.E Demonstrate control over the elements of composition to communicate clearly.

Unit 9: Longer Fiction or Drama III (15–18% of MCQ — Longer Fiction or Drama)

Unit 9 is the capstone — bringing every skill from the year to bear on a longer work. Students analyze how a character changes (and what those changes reveal about values), how significant events and conflicts function across a full narrative, and how diction and syntax reveal a narrator’s perspective. The writing emphasis is firmly on FRQ 3: choosing a work of fiction and analyzing how a literary concept contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.

Skills covered:

- 1.B Explain the function of a character changing or remaining unchanged.
- 1.E Explain how a character’s own choices, actions, and speech reveal complexities in that character, and explain the function of those complexities.
- 3.E Explain the function of a significant event or related set of significant events in a plot.

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3.F Explain the function of conflict in a text.


4.C Identify and describe details, diction, or syntax in a text that reveal a narrator's or speaker's perspective.

7.B Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.

7.C Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.

7.D Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.

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“As someone who did not have a personal college counselor, I saw Next Admit essay editing on TikTok and thought it was the perfect opportunity. I am so glad I found it because I was admitted to UPenn — and I credit a huge chunk of that to my essays which Next Admit edited. Thank you again to the team!”

— Isabela D. (UPenn '28)