

One Page Concept Review: Multiple Choice

What is it?

This one's pretty self-explanatory, no? It's the first section of the AP exam. The number of questions used to vary a bit, but now it's standardized to fifty-five questions in an hour's time. There are usually four passages (two prose cuttings and two poems), and there's usually one "easy" passage and one "hard" passage for each type. There will be pre-twentieth century literature, and there's usually at least one passage from the 16th to 18th centuries (though it will not go further back than the time of Shakespeare).

Why should I care?

The multiple choice is worth 45% of your total score on the test, so it's a really big deal.

These are the data for the 2010 AP test:

Multiple Choice Score	Overall AP Score					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
49-55 (89%-100%)	0.0%	0.1%	2.0%	32.4	65.5	4.9
42-48 (76%-88%)	0.0%	0.9%	23.7%	57.5	17.9	22.0
33-41 (60%-75%)	0.3%	15.7%	63.3%	20.0	0.7	30.9
25-32 (45%-59%)	3.3%	71.1%	25.0%	0.7	0.0	23.7
17-24 (31%-44%)	32.5%	66.8%	8.0%	0.0	0.0	13.0
0-16 (0%-29%)	88.9%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0	0.0	5.4
Total	9.9%	31.2%	30.9	20.6	7.4	100

Notice that if you score below 45%, it's very difficult to pass the test, and you are only likely to pass the test if you score above 60% on the multiple choice.

This is slightly misleading, however, since even though my students typically score in the two lower quartiles for multiple choice, they are much closer to the national average in essay scores (usually at least one or two of the three essays will beat the national average). Given the multiple choice percentages that the vast majority of my students make (below 60%), you would expect them to pass the test less than 30% of the time, but in fact, they usually pass at rates that are ten or more points higher than this. The reason for this is I have been teaching you how to write the kinds of essays that score above average on the test to make up for what I already know will be a weakness elsewhere (the multiple choice).

Why do Spring Woods students do poorly on this part of the test? It's a combination of things, but the big ones are unchallenging classes at lower grades (even in so-called pre-AP and AP classes), a student population that does not read outside of class (either for assignments or for pleasure), poor vocabulary skills (strongly correlated with not reading challenging texts), a large percentage of bilingual students (who read English more slowly than monolingual students and take longer to process answers), and a culture of low expectations at Spring Woods that translates into lazy students who make little effort to address intellectual deficiencies.

How do I do it?

- **Focus on purpose when reading the passage.** If it's a poem be thinking about theme. If it's prose passage, ask yourself why it was chosen (what it is accomplishing as a self-contained excerpt). There will be more than one question that will address this idea explicitly, and understanding the big idea will help you eliminate wrong answers.
- **Understand what the question is testing.** The AP test has moved away from including a lot of literary vocabulary in the multiple choice, but that doesn't mean that literary concepts are not tested. If you understand that a question is testing your knowledge of conflict, theme, tone, etc., you'll be in a much

better position to get the correct answer.

- **Look for answer choices that are functionally the same.** There cannot be two right answers, so both must be wrong.
- **Look for paired opposites:** Are there two choices seem to be the opposite of one another? One of them is likely the answer.
- **Look for paired qualifiers:** Are there two choices where one seems to be a stronger version of the other? One of them is likely to be the answer.
- This is the big one. **Do not look for the correct answer; instead look for wrong answers to eliminate.** There may be more than one (at least partially) correct answer for a question, but one answer choice will be more right than the others. The only way to find this consistently is to look for ways to eliminate pseudo-correct choices.

How do students screw this up?

The big problem here is that students simply do not read well enough, and instead they *sort of* understand things and think that's good enough. However, I can't fix this at this point beyond continuing to hold you accountable for understanding and applying what you read. Hopefully you've actually been applying yourself this year instead of just skating by without intellectually engaging the material.

Leaving Blanks

- **There is no penalty for guessing.** Pay attention to the time, and when you have a couple of minutes left, choose your favorite letter for any you haven't bubbled.
- **Do not leave blanks for questions that you will return to later.** This is a good way to begin mismatching the scantron bubbles to the question that you're answering. It's also a good way to miss blanks at a glance when you think that you are done. If you need to return to something, narrow down to two or three answer choices, guess, and draw a giant star next to it on the answer booklet. *If you have time, then you can go back at the end.*

Poor Time Allocation

- **Two bubbling strategies (choose one): 1) Bubble as you go, or 2) bubble after you finish each passage (except for the last one; for that one, bubble as you go so that you don't run out of time).** Circled answers in the test booklet are not graded, only the scantron. Be mindful of time.
- **You do not have to address the selections in order.** If you're having trouble with a passage, skip it and return to it. You get just as much credit for answering easy questions as you do the hard ones.
- **If you're having trouble with a question: narrow down to two or three answer choices, guess, and move on.** Some of the questions are designed to waste your time. Do not be a fool and fall for these. Draw a star next to the question on the answer booklet and return to it later *if you have time.*

Falling for Distractors

In test-writing jargon, these are incorrect answers that are designed to look correct. Here are the most common types for this test:

- **Ideas that are generally correct for the passage as a whole, but not for the line numbers in the question.**
- **Ideas that are reasonable sounding, but cannot be supported by text.**
- **Questions that are partially right and partially wrong.**
- **Questions that overstate an idea to the point that it is inaccurate.** Included in this category would be questions with *always* or *never* in them (though the AP test is seldom that unsubtle). There will usually be a less extreme version that is the correct answer.
- **Questions that understate an idea to the point that it is too generalized.** There will usually be a more specific version that is the correct answer.