

AP Lit Review Sheet: Preparation and Test-Taking Advice

Overview

- The best preparation for the AP test was having kept up with the readings and assignments throughout the year. For a lot of you, that ship has already sailed, and now you will reap the rewards of your lack of commitment. Every reading and assignment, was designed to prepare you either for a type of task or a type of reading on the test. There should be no surprises if you've done what was expected of you throughout the year.
- For those of you who have made the intellectual commitment: I thank you for your efforts and will be proud of your performance, whatever your score on this test. Even if you underperform on the test, I think you will see the benefits of having engaged in this course once you start college. This is more important to me the test anyway.
- If you are one of those who skated by all year, chances are you have about the same skill set today as you had in August-- and that's really a shame. Most high school classes do little for you in terms of making you a better writer and a better thinker (the two non-negotiables for college success). This was not one of those classes, and many of you have blown an opportunity for self-improvement due to laziness and immaturity. Remember this when extended similar opportunities in the future.
- That said, even if you've been nothing but a stupid waste of space all year, you still have over a week before the test. As an experiment, pretend for this week that I'm not an idiot-- that you don't know everything-- and follow my advice on this sheet. Many of you have at least a semi-reasonable shot at saving yourself a couple of thousand dollars in college costs if for a week or so you can act like the kind of student you should have been all year.
- You don't need to buy a professional test taking guide. Quite frankly, these are a bit of a scam for the skills-based AP tests. The review sheets I have given you are much more helpful.

What You Need to Do Before the Test

- You should study. Students who study generally perform at or near their potential. Students who wing it usually earn a score point lower than they should. For most of you, that means earning a 2 instead of the 3 you need to earn college credit.
- This is not a content test; it is a skills test. You should go through the strategy review sheets for each of the big skills that you should have mastered throughout the year. Remediate for any skills that you have not mastered. I have not deleted a single assignment, handout, or instructional model from my web site, so fix any lingering problems in the week before the test. Do not wait until the night before to attempt to do this.
- The one part of the test that is a content test is the Q3 essay, so it is the only part of the test that is under your control. Prioritize two to three major works and two to three themes for each. Become an expert in those works and themes.
- Know the rest of the major works well enough so that they are at least semi-viable choices for an emergency essay.
- Forget about writing about works you never bothered to read or finish. You're not going to fool anyone if you try to fake your way through an essay. You will make simple mistakes in detail, emphasis, or themes that will reveal you as either an idiot or a fraud. This will tank your score.

- At least one of these priority works must be a novel (occasionally the Q3 prompt will restrict you to writing about novels).
- Minimum preparation for the two to three major works that you are prioritizing: 1) know how to spell the author's name; 2) know how to spell the names of the major characters; 3) identify the two or three character arcs that you would be likely to write about on a forty minute essay.
- Better preparation for the two to three major works that you are prioritizing: 1) list out the information that will be in your thematic statement in your conclusion for the two or three themes that you are prioritizing; 2) identify the two or three turning points for the two or three character arcs that you are prioritizing and list out exactly what happened so that you can reproduce a *very* specific paraphrase on the test.
- I suggest one of your two-three priorities be the 19th century novel, even if it wasn't the favorite thing that you read this year. It will work for virtually any prompt. The exception to this is if you didn't actually read, in which case you have to become a bigger expert in the works you do prioritize (since you might have to creatively interpret the prompt). Consider using SparkNotes as part of your review process for the 19th century novels. This is why this site exists (not to fake your way through assignments).
- If you prioritize one of the summer reading novels, part of that preparation should include re-reading the notes for them, as they include passages from critical articles at various important parts of the books. If you prioritize *My Brilliant Friend*, you should also review the background presentation from class.
- If you prioritize *Yerma*, review the footnotes from the electronic copy of the play. Many of these are selections from critical articles that give you insight into themes for the play. You should also review the passages we discussed in class.
- If you prioritize *Twelfth Night*, review the two presentations from class. They are very explicitly focused on theme analysis, and the last slide of the last presentation is what should be in your conclusion.
- If you prioritize the magical realism novels, review the notes you made from the source packets and (especially) the selections from critical articles included in the outlining activity (Novel Choice Assignment #4).
- In terms of vocabulary sheets, they're mainly for multiple choice, so you should know the terms well enough to recognize their use. Better preparation is to understand when a multiple choice question is testing a concept *without* using the technical term.
- If I had to pick one vocabulary sheet for you to study, it would be "Tone Words." Poor general vocabulary is more like to hurt you than not remembering the definition of *tritagonist*.
- If I had to pick one handout for you to review it would be "Writing about Theme" (which includes the directions and examples for writing thematic statements that should be a part of your essay conclusions).
- If I had to pick one skill for you to review, it would be tone.

What You Need to Do the Night before the Test

- Get a reasonable amount of sleep. This might be the best piece of advice on this sheet.

What You Need to Do on the Day of the Test

- Wake up early enough so that you're not still groggy for the test. If you roll out of bed five minutes before school starts, you're not going to be fully awake until the essay portion.
- Breakfast is always a good idea, but don't eat so much that you're immediately ready for a nap.
- If you do the caffeine thing, caffeinate early enough so that it kicks in for the start of the test. If you bring a caffeinated beverage with you, pace yourself so you can sip it throughout the test. Studies show this is much more effective than slamming a huge amount of caffeine at once.
- Do not be an idiot and over-caffeinate. You don't need to be twitching like a meth addict, continually excusing yourself to urinate, crashing in the middle of the test, or experiencing stomach cramps.
- Avoid garbage like caffeine pills. They suck, and you'll regret using them. If you use other caffeine supplements like energy shots and other energy drinks, make sure the day of the test isn't your first time to see how they affect your body.

What You Need to Do During the test

- Carry a watch or other non-internet connected timing device to pace yourself. You cannot use a cell phone for this purpose. The proctors here at Spring Woods have screwed up the time reminders before; don't get caught with your pants down.
- Stay hydrated. You will think much more clearly. In many ways, water is a better performance enhancer than caffeine.
- Work quickly, but don't rush. In general, you want to be working faster than your preferred speed but slower than your fastest speed.

Multiple Choice

- One of the selections will be harder than the rest. This could mean it's hard to read or simply that it's time consuming to read. Its purpose is to slow you down. Consider doing it last.
- If you've spent more than a minute on a question; that's too long. Star it, guess, and move on. You get just as much credit for the easy ones as you do for the hard ones.
- Before you guess, the minimum you need to do is eliminate two-three wrong answers. Even if you don't quite understand what's going on, everyone is capable of doing at least this much. The multiple choice review sheet gives you a few strategies for eliminating answers that often work even when you don't quite know what's going on.
- Either bubble as you go, or bubble after you finish each passage (and bubbling as you go for the last passage). Do not get caught with circled answers but no bubbled answers. When time's up, it's up.
- If you are not done with a minute left, pick your favorite letter.
- Remember, some questions are designed to waste your time. If you are someone who always experiences timing difficulty, don't fall for this trap. These are the ones you should be skipping.

Essays

- Unless you're a multiple choice bad ass, two of your essays should score above a 5.
- If you are going to have a bad essay, get it over a page so that you avoid the 1-3 score point that will make it very difficult for you to pass.
- If you don't plan your essay, you're probably just rambling and summarizing. Probably both.
- All the essays are all the same deal:

Thesis: [~~I think~~] Author X is claiming Y. [S/he does this through Z]

Body Paragraphs: [~~I think~~] In this portion, Author X achieves Y by Z₁ [Z₁=a sub-division of thesis].

Conclusion: [~~I have proved~~] Author X is claiming Y. S/he does this through Z. This helps establish the broader claim about [a theme or other bigger concept in the text] because _____.

- The word “complexity” or “complex” in a prompt is AP-speak for “more than one thing at once.”
- Do NOT use the exact language of the prompt in your thesis statement.
- No topic sentences for body paragraphs? You’re probably writing a 4. Write them out before you begin if this is a persistent problem for you.
- More evidence than inference? You’re probably writing a 4. After every piece of evidence (quote in Q₁-Q₂; paraphrase in Q₃) ask yourself, “So what?” I guarantee your graders are asking this question. Follow the “So what?” with the “How?” and “Why?”
- Consider writing the hardest essay last. You’re probably not going to do that well on it anyway, so why let it eat up more than 40 minutes?
- **AFTER you’ve written your essay, GO BACK AND RE-READ THE PROMPT. Did you cover BOTH parts of the task?** If yes: move on; if not, add 2-3 sentences to your conclusion explaining how what you did write connects to the prompt. Begin with phrases like, “All of this shows,” “In terms of _____,” or “This would all suggest.” You do not have time for more extensive revision.
- Don’t be afraid to write a superficial essay if 1) you persistently have timing issues; 2) you’re running out of time; or 3) you have no idea what’s going on.
- Best piece of advice: remember you are not just answering the question, but you are also teaching the piece to the reader. This is especially true of the Q3 essay.

What to Do If You’re Screwing Up Your Time Allocation

- Easy formula for a 5 (my recipe for BS-ing an essay when time is short or you have no clue):

Thesis: [~~I think~~] Author X is claiming Y. S/he does this through diction and imagery.

Body Paragraph: [~~I think~~] Author X achieves Y through strategic diction choices. [Analysis = word choice creates positive/negative connotation; this suggests _____; use two examples]

Body Paragraph: [~~I think~~] Author X achieves Y through vivid imagery. [Analysis = imagery creates positive/negative connotation; this suggests _____; use two examples]

Conclusion: [~~I have proved~~] Author X is claiming Y. S/he does this through diction and imagery.

- Also consider making up ground by cutting down to a one body paragraph essay. This is better than running out of time and failing to write a conclusion.
- Time will be called after forty minute increments. It is okay to not be finished with the first essay after the first time marker is called if you’ve taken my advice and written your strongest essay first. You’ve got to have at least one strong essay, so stealing a little extra time to make sure this happens is not a bad strategy (particularly if you’re shooting for an upper half essay).
- It’s even okay to not be finished with the second essay after the second time marker is called, *as long as you are within five minutes or so of finishing*. If this is not true, plan on writing *two* superficial essays and prioritize just finishing the test-- not doing it right. This is obviously not an ideal strategy, but you will still score higher than leaving an essay blank or just finishing an intro on your last essay.