

Introduction to the Question One Essay (Q1 Essay)

What is it?

The Question 1 essay (hereafter, the Q1 essay) is the first of the three essays on the AP exam. It will give you a poem, occasionally a cutting from a longer work in verse (such as from a play by Shakespeare), and sometimes two short poems with similar or contrasting ideas (about a third of the time, though the test has moved away from this type of prompt in recent years). You will then be asked to write an essay about the selection or selections.

What types of essay prompts could I see?

Since I have the benefit of having seen the last four decades worth of prompts, I've done a statistical analysis (you will see these numbers again in more detail closer to the test). These are the three major categories: 1) nearly two-thirds of the time, students have been asked to determine a speaker's attitude toward something (usually a topic or theme in the poem); 2) about fifteen percent of the time, students have been asked to compare a part of the poem and how it relates to the whole; and 3) about another fifteen percent of the time, students have been asked to analyze a specific poetic or literary technique.

What are some examples of specific prompts?

Here are three recent prompts to give you a flavor:

2014. The following poem is by the sixteenth-century English poet George Gascoigne. Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the complex attitude of the speaker is developed through such devices as form, diction, and imagery.

For That He Looked Not upon Her
You must not wonder, though you think it strange,
To see me hold my louting¹ head so low;
And that mine eyes take no delight to range
About the gleams which on your face do grow.
The mouse which once hath broken out of trap
Is seldom 'ticèd with the trustless bait,
But lies aloof for fear of more mishap,

And feedeth still in doubt of deep deceit.
The scorched fly which once hath 'scaped the flame
Will hardly come to play again with fire,
Whereby I learn that grievous is the game
Which follows fancy dazzled by desire:
So that I wink or else hold down my head,
Because your blazing eyes my bale have bred.
(1573)

2015. In the following poem by Caribbean writer Derek Walcott, the speaker recalls a childhood experience of visiting an elderly woman storyteller. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-developed essay, discuss the speaker's recollection and analyze how Walcott uses poetic devices to convey the significance of the experience.

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With the frenzy of an old snake shedding its skin,
the speckled road, scored with ruts, smelling of mold,
twisted on itself and reentered the forest
where the dasheen
leaves thicken and folk stories begin.
Sunset would threaten us as we climbed closer
to her house up the asphalt hill road, whose yam vines

wrangled over gutters with the dark reek of moss,
the shutters closing like the eyelids of that mimosa
called Ti-Marie; then—lucent as paper lanterns,
lamplight glowed through the ribs, house after house—
there was her own lamp at the black twist of the path.
There's childhood, and there's childhood's aftermath.
She began to remember at the minute of the fireflies,

to the sound of pipe water banging in kerosene tins,
 stories she told to my brother and myself.
 Her leaves were the libraries of the Caribbean.
 The luck that was ours, those fragrant origins!
 Her head was magnificent, Sidone. In the gully of her
 voice

shadows stood up and walked, her voice travels my
 shelves.
 She was the lamplight in the stare of two mesmerized
 boys
 still joined in one shadow, indivisible twins.

2016. Read carefully the following poem by Richard Wilbur, first published in 1949. Then, write an essay in which you analyze how the speaker describes the juggler and what that description reveals about the speaker. You may wish to consider poetic elements such as imagery, figurative language, and tone.

The Juggler

A ball will bounce, but less and less. It's not
 A light-hearted thing, resents its own resilience.
 Falling is what it loves, and the earth falls
 So in our hearts from brilliance,
 Settles and is forgot.
 It takes a sky-blue juggler with five red balls

 To shake our gravity up. Whee, in the air
 The balls roll round, wheel on his wheeling hands,
 Learning the ways of lightness, alter to spheres
 Grazing his finger ends,
 Cling to their courses there,
 Swinging a small heaven about his ears.

But a heaven is easier made of nothing at all
 Than the earth regained, and still and sole within
 The spin of worlds, with a gesture sure and noble

He reels that heaven in,
 Landing it ball by ball,
 And trades it all for a broom, a plate, a table.

Oh, on his toe the table is turning, the broom's
 Balancing up on his nose, and the plate whirls
 On the tip of the broom! Damn, what a show, we cry:
 The boys stamp, and the girls
 Shriek, and the drum booms
 And all comes down, and he bows and says good-bye.

If the juggler is tired now, if the broom stands
 In the dust again, if the table starts to drop
 Through the daily dark again, and though the plate
 Lies flat on the table top,
 For him we batter our hands
 Who has won for once over the world's weight.

A word of advice: no matter what the prompt asks you to do, treat it as a two-part prompt.

Usually the prompt asks you to connect the task to the larger meaning of the work as a whole. In the poetry prompt this second part is often explicitly named. Even when it isn't, however, the high scoring essays always connect the poem to some larger idea, usually a theme being developed in the text.

Do I have to use the literary devices that they suggest in the prompt?

No. You may use some of them, or none of them.

One thing you should definitely NOT do is organize your essay by literary device (one body paragraph about characterization, one about imagery, etc.). Essays of this type are mechanical and superficial. They almost never score above a 5 (the lowest possible passing grade for an essay).

How do I structure the essay?

Four paragraph essays work best given the time constraint (I. Intro and thesis; II. Body Paragraph; III. Body Paragraph; IV. Conclusion with discussion of big picture or theme). It is not acceptable to have one long paragraph (you are no longer in eighth grade).

The Before/After structure should be your go-to structure for this essay. Look for some turning point or tone shift in the passage to establish the two body paragraphs. This structure essentially asks you to chunk the text into two obvious parts, writing about the writer's strategy for each part. The conclusion addresses the larger meaning or the overall structure of the work as a whole

It is very rare that College Board does not choose a poem that breaks into two logical chunks.

Before/After

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. Up until X moment, Y is true (Y=an interpretation, not an event)
- III. After X moment, Z is true (Z=an interpretation, not an event)
- IV. Change shows Theme (from thesis)

These two also work for most Q1 prompts:

- **Contrast** [I. Intro and thesis; II. Concept X; III. Contrasts with Concept Y; IV. Difference/Preference for X or Y shows something important in the text (from thesis)]
- **Idea/Qualification** [I. Intro and thesis; II. Idea/Expectation/Appearance; III. Idea/Expectation/Appearance is qualified/contradicted/reversed; IV. The gap between the two shows something important in the text (from thesis)] → This works especially well if the poem is structured around a paradox.
- **Cause/Effect** [I. Intro and thesis; II. X is true; III. X causes Y; IV. Y shows Theme (from thesis)]

Do **NOT** structure your essay by literary device. Do **NOT** write a plot summary.

If it's a two poem prompt, you will either be comparing or contrasting. Identify the point of comparison or contrast and devote one body paragraph to how that idea is developed in one poem and one paragraph to how that idea is developed in the other. The conclusion should address the significance of the similarity or difference, attempting to connect to the themes in the two poems. The poems will generally be less similar or less different than they first appear, so try to capture this complexity

What should be in the introduction?

Title, author, and genre (poem or play) [Acronym: TAG]. If it's a narrative poem (a poem that has a plot) you might also want to set up the same things you would in a story. If it's a lyric poem (one that describes thoughts or feelings), there is usually still an implied conflict that probably needs to be set up.

The last sentence needs to be your thesis (what you will be proving). Do not copy your thesis from the wording of the prompt (it should be narrowed, and it should be in your own words).

What should be in the conclusion?

1) Sum up what you have proved, and 2) discuss how this fits into the larger picture of the work as a whole. This may be thematic, or it may be about the writer's overall strategy in the passage if you can't come up with a theme.