

# An Exam Reader's Advice on Writing

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I have been involved in some way with the Advanced Placement Program since 1981. Having first taught pre-AP sophomores for 10 years, I took over AP English Literature at Lakeland High School in 1990. In 1997, I also began teaching AP English Language and devised a feeder course for 4x4 block scheduling. I have read for the AP English Literature Exam in Daytona for four years and am an endorsed College Board consultant for the Southern Region. Obviously, I am totally immersed in all things AP-related! The creative challenges and student interactions provide unbelievable stimulation and professional rejuvenation.

During my experience as an Exam Reader, I have learned a few things about writing that I would like to share with other teachers. I hope you'll find my observations helpful as you think about encouraging your students to do their best on the writing section of the AP English Literature Exam.

## **Make a plan.**

**Students should not begin writing until they fully comprehend the prompt and/or the passage.** Mere parroting of the prompt often leads to floundering around instead of developing a clear direction. I recommend that you advise your students to write directly on the passage and make quick notes and outlines in the margins. This planning step enables most writers to organize their ideas more efficiently.

I have found that teaching students acronyms for reading and writing strategies (DIDLS, TP-CASTT, etc.) can work wonders. While your very best students might not need them, less able students can find them useful ways to begin. I often suggest that my own students not only mark up the passage, but also use the margins to fill in some of the acronym steps. Although this active planning takes an extra five minutes or so, I've found that it is well worth the time. Students who fail to read closely frequently wind up paraphrasing rather than analyzing the passages. Planning helps them to stay focused.

## **Begin quickly and directly.**

Although AP Readers are instructed to read the entire essay and not to be prejudiced by a weak introduction, **a strong opening paragraph can be a real asset to a student's paper.** When answering the free-response part of the AP English Exams, writers should answer the question quickly and avoid beginning with ideas that do not relate directly to the prompt. The following hypothetical introduction for Question One on the 2002 AP English Literature Exam provides an example of what *not* to do:

"All people at some point in time have encountered a great deal of trouble in their lives. I know of so many people who have been embarrassed by parents that will wave at you from across a room. I have a friend who told me that her parents did this very same thing."

Such generalities often signal a writer's inability to respond in a thoughtful manner, suggesting that the rest of the paper also may be incoherent or rambling. The Reader might begin to suspect that the student is just trying to bluff his or her way through the question.

**One-sentence perfunctory introductions -- especially ones that repeat the wording of the prompt -- also work poorly, suggesting to the Reader that the student isn't particularly interested or doesn't care.**

I recommend that teachers tell students to create an introduction strong enough to earn a grade of 3 all by itself. That means that students should learn ways to answer the entire prompt -- **answer the prompt, not simply repeat it** -- in the introduction. This indicates to the Reader that the paper could be heading into the upper-half zone. One way to help students improve their beginning is by providing them with several introductory paragraphs from papers that have earned a wide range of scores and asking them to identify stronger and weaker openings. Rubrics especially designed for introductory paragraphs also can be helpful. After having students collect examples of several strong openings, you may want to ask them to develop their own rubric for introductory paragraphs.

### **Use paragraphs and topic sentences.**

Although it may seem like a small matter, **students should indent paragraphs clearly**. A paper without indentation or with unclear indentation often confuses a Reader. Paragraphs create the fundamental structure of the essay, and without them good ideas can get muddled. Most essays I've seen that do not use paragraphs tend to be full of confused and rambling thoughts.

**Many writers find topic sentences a useful tool both for organizing paragraphs and also for helping Readers navigate through the essay.**

### **Use quotations and explain them.**

**To score at least a 3, students would be wise to make use of pertinent references from the text.** Encourage them to use **specific quotations** to back up their assertions. However, remind them that **they must explain their quotes clearly and demonstrate how they are relevant to the question**. It is important for young writers to realize that offering long quotes without explanation bogs down the essay and can give the undesirable impression that the student is trying to fill up space rather than answer the prompt!

### **Create variety.**

Short, choppy sentences without variety indicate a student who has little background in grammar and style, perhaps someone who has read and written minimally. Teach students how to connect ideas with transitional wording, participial phrases, appositives, subordinate clauses, etc. I ask my students to imagine children making the same tower or castle each time they played with blocks. They soon would become bored. Likewise, both writers and readers get bored when everything is formulaic, lacking some individual pizzazz! I suggest asking them to experiment with different sorts of syntactical devices to help them develop a sense of style.

### **Find the right word.**

**An arsenal of appropriate vocabulary and analytical wording reveals a brilliant mind at work**, but writers should make certain that the words fit. Some students stick in big words just to sound scholarly. Ironically, some of their papers score only a 2 because they lack clarity and sometimes say nothing of relevance to the prompt.

I advise my students to **use the active voice (present tense)** as much as possible as one remedy for repetition and other superfluous wording. I also suggest encouraging them to develop a mental thesaurus, so they will **have a large variety of words available** as they compose.