Written portion of AP Exam

1. Read the Question: The first step towards writing a solid essay on the AP Literature exam is reading (and understanding) the question. What are the authors of the test asking for specifically? The answer to this question is the key to writing a well-rounded essay. The scorers of the free response portion want essays that are clear and straight to the point. Simply restating the prompt will result in a huge deduction of points. Regurgitating the question will show the reader that you may not be confident in your ability to dissect passages. This is an extremely bad impression to give, since the interpretation of text is the basis of the entire course.

2. Come Up with a Thesis: A well-written thesis is the basis of all successful essays. As mentioned previously, do NOT restate the question. Come up with your own unique topic sentence to answer the question. Make it brief and to the point. You have the rest of the essay to elaborate on your thesis; that will be your body.

3. Stay Organized: Organization is key to writing a great essay. Prepare an outline within the first few minutes of writing your essay. Perhaps even use a diagram, if you’re a visual learner. A clear and precise outline can help prevent rambling when answering the question in your essay.

4. Use a High-Level Vocabulary: Since this is an exam for an Advanced Placement English course, it is imperative that you use a vocabulary that reflects a higher level of education. However, be sure that you use your impressive vocabulary in context. Nothing looks worse than using a word incorrectly in your essay. Be careful: only use words in which you know the definition.

5. Use Your Resources: On the first two essays, you will be asked to read a passage and analyze it according to the instructions given in the question. Use the passage to your advantage. Frequently refer back to specific parts of the text. This will show the readers that you paid very close attention to detail when reading the passage. The specific references display the ability to close read, which is a skill covered frequently in an AP English Literature course.

6. Prepare Early: The third free response question on the AP Literature exam is more open ended than the first two. You will be asked a question and you will be given the opportunity to answer it pertaining to a work of literature that you have read in class. It’s important that you keep this particular essay question in mind as you work throughout the semester. If a particular work of literature stands out to you, prepare early to choose this as the piece to write about in your third essay.

7. Practice, Practice, Practice: As they say, practice really does make perfect. A good option for practicing free response questions involves searching the Internet for old exam rubrics. These show you exactly what the scorers are looking for in an essay. The AP Literature section of AP Central, a website created by the College Board to help with studying for exams, has several practice exams for your use. Take advantage of this and practice writing essays using different prompts from previous exams.

8. Use a Good Writing Utensil: Nothing is worse than getting halfway through an essay and having your pen run out of ink, or your pencil getting smudged. Often, readers prefer the look and clarity of black ink to colored ink or the graphite of pencil. Take that into mind when going into the free response portion of the exam.

9. Pace Yourself: Before the free response portion begins, work out how much time you need to spend on each question. It may even be helpful to bring a watch to time yourself on each essay. You need to give yourself ample time to complete each question. However, you also need to be sure that you are not rushing through the questions and leaving vital information out of your essays.

10. Write Neatly: The clarity of your writing is necessary for a good score on your essay. If the reader cannot decipher your chicken scratch, how can they possibly score it?

11. Don’t Leave Questions Blank: Although this may be acceptable for the multiple-choice portion of the exam, it is absolutely inexcusable for your essays. You only get three chances to prove your competency in the free response portion. Take advantage of this opportunity to show the readers how much you’ve learned from taking this AP course.

12. Understand What the Readers are Looking For: As we said earlier, rubrics are a great resource to use when preparing for the AP Literature exam. They reflect exactly how your essay will be scored. It’s vital to understand exactly what the readers are looking for in a good essay. This includes:

a) Plot comprehension: Whether or not you understand what is happening in the passages given to you to read. Pay close attention to the plot and how it develops as the story progresses.

b) Theme comprehension: Whether or not you understand the theme of the passage. The theme is the dominating central idea in a work. It’s vital that you recognize the theme very early on in your essay.

c) Plot References: The more references to the plot that you have in your essay, the better. However, this does not mean restate the entire storyline. This will bore the reader and make it seem like you are dancing around the question. Scorers like for you to be very clear and to the point in your essays.

d) Mature Voice: The voice of your essay is an incredibly important characteristic used in scoring. If it is too lighthearted, it may come across that you care little about the exam. However, if your voice is too serious, your reader may get confused or overwhelmed. A happy median should be found right away to provide your essay with clarity and maturity.

13. Listen to Your Teacher: This is perhaps the most important of all the free response tips. Over the course of the semester, your teacher will provide you with ample advice for the exam. Pay close attention to your teacher’s guidance. If the information your teacher gives you wasn’t relevant, they wouldn’t waste their time giving it to you. Your instructor knows the exam; it’s only logical to follow their advice.

The AP English Literature and Composition exam is all about analysis of different literary works. Hopefully these tips will help you tackle this massive exam with ease.