

What AP Readers Long To See

A compilation of thoughts from readers and question leaders

1. Read the prompt. It hurts to give a low score to someone who misread the prompt but wrote a good essay. While readers try to reward students for what they do well, the student must answer the prompt. "In the countless essays I've scored, I'm always amazed at how many students fail to answer the question."
2. Do everything the prompt suggests. Always Answer EXACTLY what the question asks. A Hint from the question leader of the 1998 poem, "It's a Woman's World": "Before the exam redefine those basic elusive terms that everyone loves to use, but few can define, e.g. imagery, alliteration, irony tone and metaphor. Review the basic terms of scansion, and know the difference between blank verse, free verse, and the absence of verse."
3. Think before you write. If you are working on the "open question" think about which novel or play is the best for the prompt? Don't limit yourself to the supplied suggestions. Many of the best responses deal with selections that are not on the list.

Plan and organize your response. Brainstorm and write down any ideas. Even make a quick outline if time permits. You needn't outline extensively, but a little organization will help you avoid extensive editing, such as crossing out lines or, in some cases, whole paragraphs. It's no fun for the reader to pick over the remains and try to decipher sentences crammed into the margins. For instance, no reader would probably admit this, and all readers attempt to give a fair amount of time to each essay, but arrows on the essays, directing the reader to go to another page, read a paragraph and return are often ignored.

4. Make a strong first impression. Build your opening response artistically. The introduction is the most important as it sets the reader's expectations. Get to your THESIS quickly. Do not parrot the prompt word for word, or turn the prompt around to make a statement. Another Question Leader writes, "Use the language of the prompt (question) not the prompt itself. The student writer's inclination to repeat the question verbatim is disadvantageous. Practically, the repetition is a waste of the writer's time; moreover the practice of the student writer's substituting the question for a first paragraph suggests a lack of sophistication and control as well as the inability to develop a viable thesis. Remember that the question itself is NOT a thesis though its required tasks should be the skeleton of the student essay."

5. Begin your response immediately. Don't beat around the bush with generalizations like "There are many great novels..." or "Since the beginning of time...."—Lose these timeworn phrases! Here's an example of a creative opening that immediately sets up a central idea/thesis:

An illuminated photograph of a father who "fell in love with long distance" sits on the mantle of the Wingfield's' apartment in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*."

6. Use clear transitions (see transition handout) that help the reader follow the flow of your essay. Keep your paragraphs organized; don't digress.
7. Many prompts end with the statement, "Avoid plot Summary," or a similar thought. BELIEVE IT! (You should have a brief precis at the beginning of the body of the open question.) Your essay can follow selected plot sequences in the order in which they appear in the work but your central idea/thesis—not the plot—should dictate your overall organization. You are proving an assertion, not telling a story.

8. Don't stick in a canned quote or a critic's comment if it doesn't fit. You will get a response, but not the one you want.
9. Write to express, not impress. Keep vocabulary and syntax within your zone of competence. Students who inflate their writing, using a large vocabulary word incorrectly, often inadvertently entertain, but seldom explain. There is, however, no substitute for command of a good vocabulary. A Question Leader writes, "Avoid the terms *positive* and *negative*; these words are so overused in AP essays that they almost inevitably suggest that the writer's vocabulary is imprecise."
10. Demonstrate that you understand style by showing the reader how the author has massaged the selection to create a desired effect. This indicates that you are aware of the creative process. Explain HOW not WHAT. Do not simply identify a simile for instance, explain the PURPOSE of the use of the simile. Question Leader suggestion: "Avoid such comments as, "The writer uses diction/syntax/imagery...." without providing a qualifier for these terms. For example, formal diction, sophisticated diction, awkward diction, inverted syntax, balanced syntax, convoluted syntax."
11. Maintain a sense of simplicity. The best student writers see much, but say it very succinctly. Do not mistake simplicity for "shortness." Be sure you develop your essay fully. Readers will give low scores to "thin" papers. When in doubt, find something to illustrate. Begin a few sentences with "For example...." A question leader suggests, "Avoid paraphrasing any passage from the examination itself. This is a time-consuming exercise that does not satisfy the demands of the question. While an occasional quoted item from the examination text may be important to the meaning of the student essay, it is important to avoid threading an essay together with quotations from the text. Remember that the AP Readers will have essentially memorized the question and the passage with which they are working, and the essay which is primarily the language of the passage—however artfully threaded—is quite evidently not the student's analysis."
12. Let your writing dance with ideas and insights. You can get a 6 or 7 with a lock-step approach, but the essays that earn 8's or 9's expand to a wider perspective.
13. Write legibly. If a reader can't read half the words, you won't get a fair reading—even if your essay is passed to another reader with keener eyesight.
14. Let your work stand on its own merits. Avoid penning "pity me" notes ("I was up all night," "I have a cold," etc.) to the reader.
15. NEVER refer to the author by his or her first name. He/She is not your 'buddy.'
16. Keep your essay in present tense when referring to the work. A piece of literature comes alive each time it is read.

Thanks to: Mike Auer, Eddie DuPriest, Bob Litchfield, Mary Jo Potts, Nancy Potter and the countless other readers who didn't know they would be quoted by me when, during a break at the reading, they began with, "I wish the student would....."