

## MsEffie's List of Prose Essay Prompts for Advanced Placement® English Literature Exams, 1970-2026\*

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(Updated 14 May 2022)

**NOTE:** From 1956 (first official administration of AP tests) through 1979, one AP English exam was given.

- 2026 The following excerpt is from Aimee Bender's novel *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, published in 2010. In this passage, the narrator, Rose, discovers that when she eats food she has the unique ability to perceive the feelings of the person who prepared it. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Bender uses literary elements and techniques to convey the narrator's complex experience of eating the chocolate lemon cake her mother has prepared.
- 2025 1 The following excerpt is from Rachel Cusk's novel *The Bradshaw Variations*, published in 2008. This passage describes Thomas Bradshaw's morning interactions with members of his household. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Cusk uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas.
- 2025 2 The following excerpt is from Jeannette Haien's novel *The All of It*, published in 1986. In this passage, Father Declan, an Irish priest, is driving home after a successful fishing trip. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Haien uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex portrayal of Father Declan.
- 2024 1 The following excerpt is from Mavis Gallant's short story "One Morning in June," published in 1952. In this passage, Mike Cahill is in France for one year to explore his talent for art. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Gallant uses literary elements and techniques to convey Mike's complex experience of studying painting.
- 2024 2 The following excerpt is from Jane Urquhart's novel *The Night Stages*, published in 2015. In this passage, an artist named Kenneth is finishing a mural for a new airline terminal using the long-established medium of egg tempera, a paint made of egg yolk, pigment, and water. He thinks about the influences on his work and how his mural may be received. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Urquhart uses literary elements and techniques to convey Kenneth's complex perspective as he completes his mural.
- 2023 1 The following excerpt is from Nisi Shawl's novel *Everfair*, published in 2016. In this passage, the narrator describes the experience of a young woman, Lisette, as she rides her bicycle through the French countryside in July 1889. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Shawl uses literary elements and techniques to portray Lisette's complex response to her experience of riding her bicycle.
- 2023 2 The following excerpt is from Brenda Peynado's short story "The Rock Eaters," published in 2021. In this passage, the narrator is one of a group of people who left their home country after developing the ability to fly, an ability that is accepted as realistically possible within the story. Years later, the group returns to that country with their children. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Peynado uses literary elements and techniques to convey the narrator's complex experience of this return home.
- 2022 Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale*: In this passage from the novel, published in 2008, the narrator describes two events that occur in a community: an infant's birth shortly followed by an octopus's walking out of the sea. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the author uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex characterization of the community.

- 2021 Tim Winton's novel *Breath*: In this passage, published in 2008, the main character, Bruce Pike, recalls an incident at a nearby river. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Winton uses literary elements and techniques to represent the complex response of the narrator to the incident at the riverbank.
- 2020 Multiple Prompts [Can be found in a separate folder in the DropBox files]
- 2019 William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*: Carefully read this excerpt from the novel (1885). Then, in a well-constructed essay, analyze how the author portrays the complex experience of two sisters, Penelope and Irene, within their family and society. You may wish to consider such literary elements as style, tone, and selection of detail.
- 2018 Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*: The following interchange, excerpted from an 1852 novel, occurs when two characters who have been living on the Blithedale farm—a community designed to promote an ideal of equality achieved through communal rural living—are about to part ways. In a well-written essay, analyze how Hawthorne portrays the narrator's attitude towards Zenobia through the use of literary techniques.
- 2017 Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*: In this passage from the novel (1715), Mr. Pickle encounters Godfrey Gauntlet, the brother of his beloved Emilia. Consider how the two men confront their own uncontrolled emotion and yet attempt to bid by their social norms. In a well-developed essay, analyze how the author explores the complex interplay between emotions and social propriety in the passage. You may wish to consider such literary technique a dialogue, narrative pace, and tone.
- 2016 Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: In this excerpt from the novel (1886), Michael Henchard and his daughter Elizabeth-Jane are reunited after years of estrangement. During this separation, Henchard has risen from poor seasonal farmworker to wealthy mayor of a small country town, while Elizabeth has supported herself by waiting on tables at a tavern. Paying particular attention to tone, word choice, and selection of detail, compose a well-written essay in which you analyze Hardy's portrayal of the complex relationship between the two characters.
- 2016B Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*: Read the passage from the opening of the novel carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Desai establishes a particular mood and setting through the use of such elements as selection of detail and figurative language.
- 2015 Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*: Read the passage from the opening of the 1986 novel carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how Erdrich depicts the impact of the environment on the two children. You may wish to consider such literary devices as tone, imagery, selection of detail, and point of view.
- 2015B Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*: In the following excerpt from the novel, a brother and sister are searching for fossils while their mother waits nearby. Read the passage carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Lively uses literary devices to dramatize the complex relationship among the three characters.
- 2014 Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*: Read the passage from the novel carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the author reveals the character of Moses. In your analysis, you may wish to consider such literary elements as point of view, selection of detail, and imagery.
- 2013 D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915): The following passage focuses on the lives of the Brangwens, a farming family who lived in rural England during the late nineteenth century. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Lawrence employs literary devices to characterize the woman and capture her situation.
- 2013B Cyril Dabydeen's "Mammita's Garden Cove": Carefully read the following excerpt from the short story. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Dabydeen uses literary techniques to convey Max's complex attitudes toward place.

- 2012 Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*: Carefully read the following excerpt from the novel. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the development of Estrella's character. In your analysis, you may wish to consider such literary elements as selection of detail, figurative language, and tone.
- 2011 George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874): In the passage, Rosamond and Tertius Lydgate, a recently married couple, confront financial difficulties. Read the passage carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how Eliot portrays these two characters and their complex relationship as husband and wife. You may wish to consider such literary devices as narrative perspective and selection of detail.
- 2011B Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998): The following passage is the opening of the novel by the Cree novelist and playwright Tomson Highway. Read the passage carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Highway uses literary devices to dramatize Okimasis' experience.
- 2010 Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801): The narrator provides a description of Clarence Harvey, one of the suitors of the novel's protagonist, Belinda Portman. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze Clarence Harvey's complex character as Edgeworth develops it through such literary techniques as tone, point of view, and language.
- 2010B Maxine Clair's "Cherry Bomb": Write an essay in which you analyze how Clair uses literary techniques to characterize the adult narrator's memories of her fifth-grade summer world.
- 2009 Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946): Analyze how Petry establishes Lutie Johnson's relationship to the urban setting through the use of literary devices such as imagery, personification, selection of detail, and figurative language.
- 2009B Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948): Analyze the literary techniques Hurston uses to describe Sawley and to characterize the people who live there.
- 2008 Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999): Analyze how the author uses such literary devices as speech and point of view to characterize Aran's experience.
- 2008B Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818): Analyze the literary techniques Austen uses to characterize Catherine Morland.
- 2007 Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*: Analyze how Trumbo uses such techniques as point of view, selection of detail, and syntax to characterize the relationship between the young man and his father.
- 2007B Seamus Deane reflecting on his childhood experiences with books and writing: Analyze how Deane conveys the impact those early experiences had on him.
- 2006 Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892): Analyze how the playwright reveals the values of the characters and the nature of their society.
- 2006B From "a nineteenth-century novel": Discuss how the narrator's style reveals his attitudes toward the people he describes.
- 2005 Katharine Brush's "Birthday Party" (1946): Write an essay in which you show how the author uses literary devices to achieve her purpose.
- 2005B Norris' *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*: Discuss how the characterization in the passage reflects the narrator's attitude toward McTeague. Consider such elements as diction, tone, detail, and syntax.
- 2004 Henry James's "The Pupil" (1891): Analyze the author's depiction of the three characters and the relationships among them. Pay particular attention to tone and point of view.
- 2004B Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848): This is from a novel about mill workers living in Manchester, England, in the 1840's. Analyze how Gaskell uses elements such as point of view, selection of detail, dialogue, and characterization to make a social commentary.

- 2003 Mavis Gallant's "The Other Paris": Explain how the author uses narrative voice and characterization to provide social commentary.
- 2003B Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaney's* (1996): Analyze the literary techniques Oates uses to characterize the speaker, Judd Mulvaney. Support with specific references to the passage.
- 2002 Alain de Botton's *Kiss and Tell*: Write an essay in which you analyze how the author produces a comic effect.
- 2002B Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*: Note the author's use of such elements as diction, syntax, imagery, and figurative language. Analyze how the author's use of language generates a vivid impression of Quoyle as a character.
- 2001 Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749): Analyze the techniques that Fielding employs in this scene to characterize Mr. Allworthy and Mrs. Deborah Wilkins.
- 2000 Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* (March 4, 1712): Analyze how the language of the passage characterizes the diarist and his society and how the characterization serves Addison's satiric purpose. Consider such elements as selection of detail, repetition, and tone.
- 1999 Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*: Show how the author's techniques convey the impact of the experience on the main character.
- 1998 George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: Write an essay in which you characterize the narrator's attitude toward Dorothea Brooke and analyze the literary techniques used to convey this attitude.
- 1997 Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*: Analyze how changes in perspective and style reflect the narrator's complex attitude toward the past. Consider elements such as point of view, structure, selection of detail, and figurative language.
- 1996 Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*: Analyze how the narrator reveals the character of Judge Pyncheon. Emphasize such devices as tone, selection of detail, syntax, point of view.
- 1995 Sandra Cisneros' "Eleven": Show how the author uses literary techniques to characterize Rachel.
- 1994 Sarah Jewett's "A White Heron": Show how the author dramatizes the young heroine's adventure using diction, imagery, narrative pace, and point of view.
- 1993 Lytton Strachey's conception of Florence Nightingale: Define Strachey's view and analyze how he conveys it.
- 1992 Beginning and ending of Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing": Analyze the narrative techniques and other resources of language Olsen uses to characterize the mother and her attitude.
- 1991 James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*: Discuss the ways Boswell differentiates between the writing of Addison and Johnson.
- 1990 Joan Didion's "Self-deception - Self-respect": Show how style and tone help convey attitude.
- 1989 Joseph Conrad's "Captain MacWhirr" from *Typhoon*: Define attitude of speaker toward Captain and analyze techniques he uses to define Captain's character.
- 1988 John Updike's "Reunion": Analyze blend of humor, pathos, and grotesque in their story.
- 1987 George Eliot's "Leisure" from *Adam Bede*: Describe her two views of leisure and discuss stylistic devices she uses to convey those views.
- 1986 Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son*: Define narrator's attitude toward characters through imagery, diction, narrative structure, choice of detail.

- 1985 Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: Compare two drafts of a passage from *A Farewell to Arms* and analyze the effect of revisions.
- 1984 Jane Austen's *Emma*: Explain how passage characterizes Emma more than Harriet.  
 Mailer's "Death of Benny Paré": Explain and analyze effect on reader and how diction, syntax, imagery, and tone produce that effect. (Two prose prompts; no poem)
- 1983 Thomas Carlyle's "Work": Examine how he uses language to convince the reader of the rightness of his position.
- 1982 Adlai Stevenson's "Cat Bill": Analyze strategies that make the argument effective for his audience.
- 1981 George Bernard Shaw on his mother's cremation: Analyze how diction and detail convey attitude.
- 1980 Two funerals: Compare the different authors' attitudes by examining diction and choice of detail; also discuss their effect on the reader.
- 1979 Quentin Bell on the Woolf family: Show how style reveals feelings about family.
- 1978 Samuel Johnson's "Review of 'A Free Enquiry Into The Nature and Origin of Evil'": Analyze Samuel Johnson's attitude toward writer Soame Jenyns and treatment of Jenyns' argument.
- 1977 No prose selection (instead, had the following prompt: A character's attempt to recapture or reject the past is important in many plays, novels, and poems. Choose a work in which a character views the past with such feelings as reverence, bitterness, or longing. Show with clear evidence how the character's view of the past is used to develop a theme in the work.)
- 1976 John Gardner's *Jason and Medea*: Characterize briefly the world and way of life described in the passage, discuss the effect of the passage as a whole, and analyze those elements that achieve this effect.
- 1975 Pär Lagerkvist's *The Marriage Feast*: Define and discuss the subject of the story. Direct your remarks to the significance of the events described.
- 1974 Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*: In the opening lines of the passage we are told the "new arrangement was inevitably confounding" to Maisie. Write a descriptive or narrative piece which presents a person who is undergoing a new experience that is confounding.
- 1973 E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Dickens' *Hard Times*: Explain how each author's presentation of details is intended to shape the reader's attitudes toward the place he describes – Coketown and the caves. Give specific attention to the function of word choice, imagery, phrasing, and sentence structure.
- 1972 Five passages of role of younger generation in society: Write an essay on three of the passages in which you discuss the nature of each speaker, his assumptions about his audience, and the effects he wants to have on them. You should consider the diction and sentence structure of each of the passages you select
- 1971 George Orwell's "Some Thoughts on the Common Toad": Demonstrate how the speaker establishes his attitude toward the coming of spring.
- 1970 George Meredith's "Ferdinand and Miranda" from *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*: Show how the young woman and the young man in the passage are made to seem naturally suited for one another.

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