

Writing Multiple Choice Questions for AP English Language Exam

While there are a few sample sets of actual Multiple Choice questions used on the AP English Language and Composition Exam available through AP Central and in Workshop Handbooks. Practice with these sets is useful for many students as preparation for the exam. However there are not enough to depend upon as the only tools for test preparation. And, there's another trap connected with putting all the "test prep eggs" in one basket = using sample question sets exclusively develops and encourages habits that may lead to focusing on trying to "outfox" the exam rather than on developing the skills, in this case analytic skills, the MC questions are designed to assess.

An alternate choice to prepare students for the very important Multiple Choice section of the exam is to focus on finding the correct choice – there always is a correct choice – rather than on techniques to eliminate the wrong choices. Success on the AP MC section questions is most consistently achievable by applying the skills associated with Close Reading/Text Analysis, one of the foundation skills taught in the course.

Probably the most effective approach to honing these skills is to (1) deconstruct the process involved in creating Multiple Choice questions and then, using this knowledge, (2) construct multiple-choice questions on your own. To do so, students need to learn the process of constructing their own Multiple Choice questions.

Passage Characteristics

First, appropriate passages need to be found.

- Passages are typically 500-650 words long, complete in themselves (although they may be part of a longer document), exemplify the qualities of academic discourse insofar as they deal with ideas and the relationships between ideas, and are composed as claim-based arguments.
- They are often "rhetorically rich" and feature instances in which the author's language and style choices contribute to meaning.
- They also are drawn from writings of the past as well as contemporary sources and are fairly typical of the kinds of texts undergraduate researchers in any area might come across.
- Generally they are not familiar texts for most test takers.
- Finally they must be "analyzable" – that is they must yield material for between 14 and 17 questions all of which have "correct" answers.

Question Characteristics

- Multiple-choice item – a test question in which a number of responsive choices are given from which the correct answer is to be selected; typically there are 5 options labeled from A to E.
 - Stem – the initial part of the item in which the task is delineated – it may be a question, directions, or an incomplete statement.
 - Options – all the choices in an item
 - Distractors – the incorrect options
- _____ There are often common elements to the distractors –
- Opposite from the Key
 - Possible answer but not correct in the context of the passage
 - Nearly right (has some of the same characteristics/qualities as the Key but not all of them)
 - Almost right (has many of the same characteristics/qualities as the Key but not all of them)
- Key – the correct option

Example: The author of Paradise Lost is:

- A. John Keats (opposite from key)*
- B. Alexander Pope (possible because he wrote narrative poetry)*
- C. Geoffrey Chaucer (more possible because he wrote long narrative dramatic poetry)*
- D. William Shakespeare (even more possible because he wrote long dramatic poetry in the 17th century)*
- E. John Milton (Key)*

Item Writing

- The material to be tested should be significant. It is easy to write questions about trivia – resist the temptation
- Have a single clear Key!
- In a complete set of Items (14---17) 20---25% should be demanding, 20---25% easy, and 50---60% moderate.
- Use a vocabulary level appropriate for the population being tested
- Word items clearly and concisely
- Avoid trickiness (usually subtle but unimportant distinctions)
- Options should be uniform in structure (single words or phrases or sentences but not mixed) and logically ordered
- Do not use “All of the above” or “none of the above”
- Avoid options that logically overlap
- Distractors need to be plausible Stem
- Must be long enough to make the question clear but should not try to teach a lesson – provide no more information in the stem than necessary
- May be either a question or an incomplete statement to be completed by the options

- Do not use “of the following” – that is implicit in the nature of the test
- Used the positive approach for asking the questions (avoid using “not”)
- If you must use a negative approach, type the negative word in all caps (NOT, EXCEPT, LEAST, etc.) Options
- Always start with the key, the one best response that any individual well-informed of the task and the material will select and accept as the correct choice
- Select distractors that are plausible but not correct
- Answer options should be written in a similar syntactic format
- Answer options should be about the same length and level of complexity,
- Avoid “None of the above” as an option
- Distribute the position of the key randomly – avoid the tendency to always make it ‘C.’

Sample Multiple Choice Stems

- The speaker’s primary purpose in the passage is to....
- The phrase, “ ” functions primarily as....
- The attitude of the entire passage (or lines – to ---) is one of....
- The author uses this (a certain image or rhetorical strategy) for the purpose of....
- The main rhetorical strategy of the ___ paragraph is....
- The word “ ” in context of line(s) ___ refers to which of the following....
- The reason for the shift in tone is due to
- The phrase “ ” in line ___ refers to....
- In relation to the passage as a whole, the statement in the (first, second) sentence presents....
- In lines ___, the speaker employs which of the following rhetorical strategies....
- Which of the following best summarizes the main topic of the passage
- The style of the passage as a whole is most accurately characterized as....
- The primary rhetorical function of lines ___ is to....
- The tone of the passage shifts from one of ___ to one of ___
- The antecedent for “ ” in the clause “ ” is
- The point of view indicated in the phrase “ ” in line “ ” is that of....
- Which of the following best describes the function of the third paragraph in relation to the two paragraphs that precede it
- The passage is an appeal for a....
- The primary rhetorical function of lines ___ is to,,,,
- The diction in the passage is best described as....
- One prominent stylistic characteristic of the ___ paragraph is the use of

At the Dam – Joan Didion

Since the afternoon in 1967 when I first saw Hoover Dam, its image has never been entirely absent from my inner eye. I will be driving down Sunset Boulevard, or about to enter a freeway, and abruptly those power transmission towers will appear before me, canted vertiginously over the tailrace. Sometimes I am confronted by the intakes and sometimes by the shadow of the heavy cable that spans the canyon and sometimes by the ominous outlets to unused spillways, black in the lunar clarity of the desert light. Quite often I hear the turbines. Frequently I wonder what is happening at the dam this instant, at the precise intersection of time and space, how much water is being released to fill downstream orders and what lights are flashing and which generators are in full use and which just spinning free.

I used to wonder what it was about the dam that made me think of it at times and places where I once thought of the Mindanao Trench, or of the stars wheeling in their courses or of the words As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, amen. Dams are, after all, commonplace: we have all seen one. This particular dam had existed as an idea in the world's mind for almost forty years before I saw it. Hoover Dam, showpiece of the Boulder Canyon project, the several million tons of concrete that made the Southwest plausible, the fiat accompli that was to convey, in the innocent time of its construction, the notion that mankind's highest promise lay in American engineering.

Of course the dam derives some of its emotional effect from precisely that aspect, that sense of being a monument to a faith since misplaced. "They died to make the desert bloom," reads a plaque dedicated to the ninety---six men who died building this first of the great high dams, and in context the phrase touches, suggests all of that trust in harnessing resources of the ameliorative power of the dynamo, so central to the early Thirties. Boulder City, built in 1931 as the construction town for the dam, retains the ambience of a model city, a new town, a toy triangular grid of green lawns and trim bungalows, all fanning out from the Reclamation building. The bronze sculptors at the dam itself evoke muscular citizens of tomorrow that never came, sheaves of wheat clutched heavenward, thunderbolts defined. Winged Victories guard the flagpole. The flag whips in the canyon wind. The empty Pepsi-Cola can clatters across the terrazzo. The place is perfectly frozen in time.

But history does not explain it all, does not entirely suggest what makes that dam so affecting. Nor, even, does energy, the massive involvement with power and pressure and the transparent sexual overtones to that involvement. Once when I revisited the dam I walked through it with a man from the Bureau of Reclamation. Once in a while he would explain something, usually in that recondite language having to do with "peaking power," with "outages," and "dewatering," but on the whole we spent the afternoon in a world so alien, so complete and so beautiful unto itself, that it was scarcely necessary to speak at all. We saw almost no one. Cranes moved above us as if under their own volition. Generators roared. Transformers hummed. The gratings on which we stood vibrated. We watched a hundred---ton steel shaft plunging down to that place where the water was. And finally we got down to that place where the water was, where the water sucked out of Lake Mead roared through thirty---foot

penstocks and then into thirteen foot penstocks and finally into the turbines themselves.

There was something beyond all that, something beyond energy, beyond history, something I could not fix in my mind. When I came up from the dam that day the wind was blowing harder, through the canyon and all across the Mojave, but out at the dam there was no dust, only the rock and the dam and a little greasewood and a few garbage cans, their tops chained banging against a fence. I walked across the marble star map that traces a sidereal revolution of the equinox and fixes forever, the Reclamation man had told me, for all time and for all people who can read the stars, the date the dam was dedicated. The star map was, he had said, for when we were all gone and the dam was left. I had not thought much of it when he said it, but I thought of it then, with the wind whining and the sun dropping behind a mesa and the finality of a sunset in space. Of course that was the image I had seen without much realizing what I saw, a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is.

1. The overall tone of this passage can best be described as
 - a) Regretfully reminiscent
 - b) Philosophically introspective
 - c) Whimsically lighthearted
 - d) Anxiously foreboding
 - e) Hesitantly guileful

2. Paragraph 2, lines 11 – 19, makes a reference to all of the following EXCEPT
 - a) a national symbol
 - b) religious allusion
 - c) foreign terminology
 - d) regional hyperbole
 - e) understated importance

3. Throughout this passage the narrator utilizes
 - a) pathos
 - b) deductive reasoning
 - c) logic
 - d) ethos
 - e) definition

4. The underlying purpose of this passage seems to be to
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
 - e. articulate the narrator's fascination with the dam as well as her reverence for its power.

5. In the context of this passage, the phrase “canted vertiginously.” Line 4, most closely means

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. angled dizzingly
- d. _____
- e. _____

6. As the passage draws to a close, it establishes a feeling that can best be described as

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. haunting

7. The first sentence of paragraph 5, line 44-46, contains the specific rhetorical device known as

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. anaphora
- e. _____

The following excerpt is from the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

His mistress had been severely reprimanded by her husband for helping Frederick Douglass learn to read. After all, the husband admonished, giving a slave the knowledge to read was like giving the slave access to thinking he or she was human. If you give the slaves an inch, they will take the ell.

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another, In entertaining upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she did not shed a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence her tender heart became stone, and the lamb---like disposition gave way to one of tiger---like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practice her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition [to my learning to read] than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no pre---caution could prevent me from taking the ell.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was so successful, was that of making friends with all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome, for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. The bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a

testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. This used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

1.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

2.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

3.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

4.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

From Mark Twain, "Taming the Bicycle"

I thought it over, and concluded I could do it. So I went down and bought a barrel of Pond's Extract and a bicycle. The expert came home with me to instruct me. We chose the backyard, for the sake of privacy, and went to work.

Mine was not a full-grown bicycle, but only a colt – a 50-inch with pedals shortened up to forty-eight – and skittish like any other colt. The Expert explains the things points briefly, then he got on its back and rode around a little, to show me how easy it was to do. He said that the dismounting was perhaps the hardest thing to learn, and so we would leave that to the last. But he was in error there. He found, to his surprise and joy, that all he needed to do was to get me on to the machine and stand out of the way; I could get off, myself. Although I was totally inexperienced, I dismounted in the best time on record. He was on that side, shoving up the machine; we all came down with a crash, he at the bottom, I next, and the machine on top.

We examined the machine, but it was not in the least injured. This was hardly believable. Yet the Expert assured me it was true; in fact the examination proved it. I was partly to realize, then how admirably these things are constructed. We applied some Pond's Extract, and resumed. The Expert got up on the other side to shove up this time, but I dismounted on that side so the result was as before.

The machine was not hurt. We oiled ourselves up again, and resumed. This time the Expert took a sheltered position behind, but somehow or other we landed on him again.

He was full of surprised admiration; said it was abnormal. She was all right, not a scratch on her, not a timber started anywhere. I said it was wonderful, while we were greasing up, but he said when I came to know these steel spider-webs I would realize that nothing but dynamite could cripple them. Then he limped out to position, and we resumed once more. This time the Expert took up the position of a short-stop, and got a man to shove up behind. We got up a handsome speed, and presently traversed a brick, and I went out over the top of the tiller and landed, head down, on the instructor's back, and saw the machine fluttering in the air between me and the sun. It was well it came down on us, for it broke the fall, and it was not injured.

Five days later I got out and was carried down to the hospital, and found the Expert doing pretty fairly. In a few more days I was quite sound. I attribute this to my prudence in always dismounting on something soft. Some recommend a feather bed, but I think an Expert is better.

The Expert got out at last, brought four assistants with him. It was a good idea. The four held the graceful cobweb upright while I climbed in the saddle; then they formed in column and marched on either side of my while the Expert pushed behind; all hands assisted at the dismount.

The bicycle had what is called the "wabbles," and had them very badly. In order to keep my position, a good many things were required of me, and in every instance the thing required was against nature. Against nature, but not against the laws of nature. That is to say that whatever the needed thing might be, my nature, habit, and breeding moved me to attempt it one way, while some immutable and unsuspected law of physics required that it be done in just the other way. I perceived by this how radically and grotesquely wrong had been the life-long education of my body and members. They were steeped in ignorance; they know

nothing – nothing which it could profit them to know. For instance, if I found myself falling to the right, I put the tiller hard to the other way, by a quite natural impulse, and so violated a law, and kept going down. The law required the opposite thing – the big wheel must be turned in the direction in which you are falling. It is hard to believe this when you are told it. And not merely hard to believe it, but impossible; it is opposed to all our notions. And it is just as hard to do it, after you do come to believe it. Believing it, and knowing by the most convincing truth that it is true, does not help; you can't anymore do it than you could before; you can neither force nor persuade yourself to do it than you could at first. The intellect has to come to the front, now. It has to teach the limbs to discard their old education and adopt the new.

When you have reached the point in bicycling where you can balance the machine tolerably fairly and propel it and steer it, then comes your next task – how to mount it. You do it in this way; you hop along behind it on your right foot, resting the other on the mounting-peg, and grasping the tiller with your hands. At the word, you rise on the peg, stiffen your left leg, hang the other one in the air in a general and indefinite way, lean your stomach against the rear of the saddle, and then fall off, maybe on one side, maybe on the other; but you fall off. You get up and do it again; and once more; and then several times.

By this time you have learned to keep your balance; and also to steer without wrenching the tiller out by the roots (I say tiller because it is a tiller; “handle-bar” is a lamely descriptive phrase). So you steer along, straight ahead, a little while, then you rise forward, and with a steady strain, bringing your right leg, and then your body into the saddle, catch your breath, fetch a violent hitch this way and that, and down you go again.

But you have ceased to mind the going down by this time; you are getting to light on one foot or the other with considerably certainty. Six or seven more attempts and six more falls make you perfect. You land in the saddle comfortable, next time, and stay there – that is, if you can be content to let your legs dangle, and leave the pedals alone awhile; but if you grab at once for the pedals, you are gone again. You soon learn to wait a little and perfect your balance before reaching for the pedals; and then the mounting art is acquired, is complete, and a little practice will make it simple and easy to you, though spectators ought to keep off a rod or two to one side, along at first, if you have.

And now you come to the voluntary dismount; you learned the other kind first of all. It is quite easy to tell one how to do the voluntary dismount; the words are few, the requirements are simple, and apparently undifficult; let your left pedal go down till your leg is nearly straight, turn your wheel to the left, and get off as you would from a horse. It certainly does sound exceedingly easy; but it isn't. Try as you may, you don't get down as you would from a horse, you get down as you would from a house afire. You make a spectacle of yourself every time.