

Strategies for Taking The AP Multiple Choice Literature Exam

<https://blog.prepscholar.com/ap-literature-multiple-choice>

There are eight question types you may encounter on the AP Lit exam. In this section, I'll go over each question type and how to answer it. All questions are taken from the sample questions in the "[AP Course and Exam Description](#)." Passages for these questions are available there as well.

1. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension questions test whether you understood what the passage was saying on a literal, concrete level. You don't need to flex your interpretation or analysis muscles here—just report what the passage is saying. You can spot these questions because they usually use words and phrases like “according to,” “asserting,” and “mentioned.” **The best strategy for these questions is to go back and re-read the portion of the text** associated with the question to make absolutely sure that you are reading it correctly. You may need to read a little before and/or after the moment mentioned to orient yourself and find the most correct answer.

Example:

13. According to the speaker, the prophet's “word of the weapons” (line 5) will probably not be heeded because
- (A) human beings are interested in weapons
 - (B) nature is more fascinating than warfare
 - (C) men and women are more concerned with love than with weapons
 - (D) people have heard such talk too often before
 - (E) people cannot comprehend abstract descriptions of power

Explanation:

The lines the passage is referring to say, “Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range / The long numbers that rocket the mind / Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind, / unable to fear what is too strange.”

This question is asking why people won't listen to the prophet when he talks about the dangers of weapons. Which of the answers makes the most sense? Choice (A), “human beings are interested in weapons,” might be a tempting choice simply because that's a common theme and message of many works. But nowhere in the passage does it say that humans are interested in weapons! Eliminate it. Choices (B) and (C) can also both be eliminated because this part of the passage says nothing about nature or love, even indirectly. Choice (D) may also be tempting simply because it's another common theme in literature—that people don't listen to repeated warnings. But again, there's not really anything in the passage to support that.

This leaves (E), “people cannot comprehend abstract decisions of power.” This lines up nicely with the passage, which says that the “hearts” of the people are “unable to fear what is too strange.” (E) is the correct answer.



The people in this poem have hearts of stone.

2. Inference

These questions take you one step beyond simple reading comprehension and ask you to make an inference based on the evidence in the passage—you may be asked about a character or narrator’s implied opinion, the author’s attitude, etc. This will be something that isn’t stated directly in the passage, but that you can assume based on what is actually said in the passage. These questions generally use words like “infer” and “imply.”

There are two keys to answering these questions: first, as always, **go back and read the part of the passage the question is concerned with**. Second, don’t be tripped up by the fact that you are making an inference—the best answer **will be most supported by what is actually written in the passage**. Inference questions are like second-level reading comprehension questions—you need to know not just what a passage says, but **what it means**.

Example:

1. From the first sentence, one can infer which of the following about the Dodsons’ and Tullivers’ religious and moral ideas?
 - (A) The narrator is unable to describe them with complete accuracy.
 - (B) They have no real logical foundation.
 - (C) They cannot be appreciated by anyone who does not share them.
 - (D) They spring from a fundamental lack of tolerance for the ideas of others.
 - (E) They are not typical of those of British Protestants in general.

Explanation:

The first sentence of the passage reads, “Certainly the religious and moral ideas of the Dodson and Tullivers were of too specific a kind to be arrived at deductively from the statement that they were part of the Protestant population of Great Britain.”

Which choice is the most reasonable inference about the Dodson and Tulliver religious ideas based on the first sentence? Choice (A) says “the narrator is unable to describe them with complete accuracy.” This might be true, but there’s nothing in the first sentence to support this inference—the narrator says that their ideas are “too specific,” not they the narrator can’t describe them accurately. Eliminate Choice (A). Choice (B), “they have no real logical foundation” may also be true, but can’t be inferred from the sentence, which gives no indication of whether their beliefs are logical or not. Choice (C) may be tempting—the idea that they cannot be appreciated by anyone who doesn’t share them might seem to dovetail nicely with the fact that they are “too specific” for the mainstream Protestant population. But is this the best choice that’s most supported by the passage? Let’s keep it in mind but consider the remaining answers.

Choice (D) posits that the beliefs of the Dodsons and Tullivers “spring from a fundamental lack of tolerance.” This is a leap that is not supported by what the first sentence actually says; eliminate it. Choice (E) says that their beliefs “are not typical of British Protestants in general.” The sentence says that their beliefs are “too specific” for one to know them simply because the Dodsons and Tullivers identify as British Protestants, which implies that their beliefs in fact do not “match up” with mainstream British Protestant beliefs. Choice (E) is the inference most supported by the passage, then—even more supported than Choice (C). So, (E) is the answer. Remember, multiple answers may seem like they could be correct, **but only the best answer is the correct one.**



Do you think appropriately ornate churches are also important to the Dodsons and Tullivers?

3. Identifying and Interpreting Figurative Language

These questions ask you to either identify figurative language within the passage or to interpret what figurative language means in the context of the passage. These questions are identifiable because they will either outright mention figurative language or a figurative device, or there will be a figurative language phrase in the question itself.

Once again, the most important thing you can do to be successful on these questions is to **go back and re-read!** For figurative language, the meaning is very much dependent on the phrase's **context in the passage**. Consider what is said around the figurative phrase and what the phrase is referring to.

Example 1: Identifying Figurative Language

11. Which of the following is used figuratively?
- (A) "well-cured hams at one's funeral" (lines 27–28)
 - (B) "the hoarding of coins" (line 36)
 - (C) "their butter and their fromenty" (line 47)
 - (D) "the proper bearers at your funeral" (lines 52–53)
 - (E) "to eat it with bitter herbs" (line 71)

Explanation:

We need to look at each of these phrases in context to tell which is being used figuratively. Choice (A) comes from the sentence, "It was necessary to be baptized, else one could not be buried in the churchyard, and to take the sacrament before death as a security against more dimly understood perils; but it was of equal necessity to have the proper pall-bearers and well-cured hams at one's funeral, and to leave an unimpeachable will." The phrase "well-cured hams at one's funeral," is clearly literally referring to funeral arrangements; (A) can be eliminated.

Moving on, choice (B) comes from the sentence, "A Dodson would not be taxed with the omission of anything that was becoming...such as obedience to parents, faithfulness to kindred, industry, rigid honesty, thrift, the thorough scouring of wooden and copper utensils, the hoarding of coins likely to disappear from the currency, the production of first-rate commodities for the market, and the general preference for whatever was home-made." In this case "the hoarding of coins" refers directly to a behavior the Dodsons considered "becoming," and is not figurative. (B) can be eliminated.

Choice (C) comes from the clause, "society owes some worthy qualities in many of her members to mothers of the Dodson class, who made their butter and their fromenty well, and would have

felt disgraced to make it otherwise.” Again, this refers literally to making butter and fromenty; (C) can be eliminated.

Choice (D) is from the sentence, “To live respected, and have the proper bearers at your funeral, was an achievement of the ends of existence.” Once more, this refers on a concrete level to actual funeral-bearers (echoing the discussion of proper funerals earlier in the passage) and is not figurative.

This leaves only (E), from the sentence, “A conspicuous quality in the Dodson character was its genuineness: its vices and virtues alike were phases of a proud, honest egoism, which had a hearty dislike to whatever made against its own credit and interest, and would be frankly hard of inconvenient ‘kin,’ but would never forsake or ignore them—would not let them want bread, but only require them to eat it with bitter herbs.” It’s pretty easy to identify “eat it with bitter herbs” as figurative if you are familiar with the allusion to “bitter herbs” which symbolize the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt in the Jewish tradition. If you don’t know that, you can still identify this as the figurative phrase because it seems more likely that this phrase is referring to feeding your ‘kin’ but shaming them for needing your help as opposed to actually feeding the hungry with bread and “bitter herbs.” (E) is the correct answer.

Example 2: Interpreting Figurative Language

19. The phrase “that live tongue” (line 27) is best understood as

- (A) a metaphor for nature
- (B) an image of the poet’s mind
- (C) a symbol of the history of the world
- (D) a reference to the poem itself
- (E) a metaphor for the advice of the prophet

Explanation:

This questions asks you to interpret what the figurative phrase “that live tongue” means. To orient you in the poem, these stanzas are advising the prophet to “speak of the world’s own change” (13).

The poem states, “What should we be without / The dolphin’s arc, the dove’s return, / these things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken? Ask us, prophet, how we shall call / our natures forth when that live tongue is all / Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken.”

In the context of the poem, right the narrator asks what we are without “that live tongue,” the poem speaks of how we “see ourselves” in “the dolphin’s arc” and “the dove’s return.” These are images of nature. The best interpretation of “that live tongue,” then, is answer (A), as a metaphor for nature. In essence, the stanza means, “Ask us, prophet, how we shall know ourselves when nature is destroyed.”



The dolphin's arc.

4. Literary Technique

These questions ask why the author uses particular words, phrases, or structures. Essentially, what purpose do such choices serve in a literary sense? What effect is created? These questions often include words like “serves chiefly to,” “effect,” “evoke,” and “in order to.”

Of course to approach these questions, re-read the part of the passage referred to. **But also ask yourself, why did the author use these particular words or this particular structure?** What is being accomplished by this specific literary “move”?

Example:

21. Which of the following best describes an effect of the repetition of the phrase “ask us” in line 33?
- (A) It suggests that the prophet himself is the cause of much of the world’s misery.
 - (B) It represents a sarcastic challenge to the prophet to ask the right questions.
 - (C) It suggests that the speaker is certain of the answer the prophet will give.
 - (D) It makes the line scan as a perfect example of iambic pentameter.
 - (E) It provides a tone of imploring earnestness.

Explanation:

This stanza containing the repetition of “ask us” reads: “Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose / Our hearts shall fail us; come demanding / Whether there shall be lofty or long-standing / When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close.”

So what is the effect of repeating “ask us, ask us”? Choice (A) says it suggests the prophet is causing much of the world’s misery. There’s nothing in the stanza—or even the entire poem—to suggest this, so we can eliminate it. Choice (B) says it represents a sarcastic challenge. This stanza doesn’t read as sarcastic, though, but very serious—eliminate (B). Choice (C) says it suggests the speaker is certain of the answer the prophet will give. This doesn’t really make sense because the speaker isn’t actually asking the prophet questions, but telling the prophet what questions to ask. Eliminate (C). Choice (D) says it makes the line into perfect iambic pentameter. You can eliminate this one without even worrying about what syllables are emphasized because a perfect line of iambic pentameter has 10 syllables and this line has 11. This leaves (E)—the effect is to provide a “tone of imploring earnestness.” Given that the speaker seems to be begging the prophet to ask particular questions, this fits. (E) is the correct answer.

5. Character Analysis

Character analysis questions will ask you to identify something about a character—their opinions, attitudes, beliefs, relationships with other characters, and so on. In many ways this is a special type of inference questions, because you are inferring broader traits of the character based on the evidence presented in the passage. As you might expect, character questions are asked much more frequently for prose passages than poetry ones.

The key here is to pay attention to **everything that is directly stated about the character(s)** in the relevant parts of the passage. Like in an inference question, there **will be an answer that best fits with the evidence in the passage.**

Example:

2. In lines 13–17 (“Their religion . . . asthma”), the narrator draws attention to the Dodson sisters’
- (A) devotion to certain rituals
 - (B) untroubled complacency
 - (C) deep religious conviction
 - (D) disturbed consciences
 - (E) sense of history and tradition

Explanation:

These lines read, “Their religion was of a simple, semi-pagan kind, but there was no heresy in it—if heresy properly means choice—for they didn’t know there was any other religion except that of chapel-goers, which appeared to run in families, like asthma.”

Choice (A) purports that this part of the passage draws attention to the Dodson sisters’ devotion to certain rituals. No rituals are mentioned here; (A) can be eliminated.

Choice (B) says these lines point to their “untroubled complacency.” The passage states that they didn’t know of any other religion. If they don’t know, we can reasonably infer that they are not troubled by their own religion. Keep (B) in the running.

Choice (C) purports they have “deep religious conviction.” This seems like a bit of a leap; all the passage really states is that their religions if “semi-pagan,” but not heretical because they simply don’t know any other religion other than “chapel-goers” which seems to be tied to family lineage. We can’t reasonably infer that they have strong religious conviction from this. Eliminate (C).

Choice (D) states that they have “disturbed consciences.” Again, nothing in the passage makes this a reasonable conclusion; if they don’t know there could be other religious traditions, why would they be disturbed by their own?

Choice (E) says they have a “sense of history and tradition.” This might be a tempting choice because they point to the fact that the religion of “chapel-goers...appeared to run in families.” But that’s not *their* religion, so this isn’t a well-supported inference.

Thus, Choice (B) provides the most reasonable inference about the Dodson sisters and is the correct answer.



Quite a character.

6. Overall Passage Questions

These questions will require you to take a “bird’s-eye view” of the passage and identify or describe a characteristic of the passage as a whole: its purpose, tone, genre, and so on. These can be difficult because you can’t simply go back to a specific place in the passage to find the best answer; you need to consider the passage overall.

Consider the overall picture created by the tiny details. I strongly recommend marking up texts for main themes, purpose, tone, etc on the first read-through so that you can consult your margin notations for these kinds of questions.

Example:

9. In the passage, the narrator is most concerned with
- (A) describing the values held by the Dodsons
 - (B) contrasting different forms of British Protestantism
 - (C) arguing for the importance of theological values as opposed to practical ones
 - (D) lamenting the decline of religious values in the lives of people like the Dodsons
 - (E) questioning the sincerity of the Dodsons

Explanation:

It is clear through even a quick scan of this passage that the narrator goes on at length about the Dodsons, so we can surmise that the narrator is most concerned with something about the Dodsons. We can eliminate (B) and (C), then, as they don't say anything about the Dodsons.

So what about the Dodsons is the narrator most concerned with? The first sentence mentions their "religious and moral ideas," but then describes their "semi-pagan" but not heretical religion. We then see "the religion of the Dodsons consisted in revering whatever was customary and respectable" (22-23), followed by a long list of what that is. The rest of the passage similarly describes what the Dodsons believe is important, from being "richer than was supposed" to doing right thing "towards kindred." It is clear, then, that the narrator is most concerned with describing the values of the Dodsons, which aligns with choice (A).

7. Structure

These questions ask about **specific structural elements of the passage**. Often you'll be asked about shifts in tone, digressions, or the specific form of a poem. Sometimes these questions will point to a specific part of the passage/poem and ask you to identify what that part of the passage is accomplishing within in the larger excerpt.

This is another question type where marking the passage on your first read-through will be very helpful—be sure to mark any shifts in structure, tone, genre, etc as you read, and any structural elements that seem unusual or significant.

Example:

42. Lines 44–48 can be best described as a
- (A) digression from the main subject of the poem
 - (B) change from description to narration
 - (C) counterargument to establish the speaker's credibility
 - (D) metaphorical application of the image of the lute
 - (E) simile for the relationship between the speaker and Sara

Explanation:

Lines 1-34 describe an image of the narrator playing his lute for his love. Lines 34-43 establish that the narrator is about to introduce an idle thought (yes, this is a loquacious poem). Lines 44-48 read: “And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely fram’d, / That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?”

So what’s the narrator saying here? He is wondering if “all of animated nature” (so all living things) are just harps, and thought is the strings being played. This is clearly metaphorical, and the third footnote for the passage tells us that “lute” is a synonym for “harp.” So the answer is (D)—this part of the passage functions as a “metaphorical application of the image of the lute.”



It's a harp! No, it's a lute! No, it's both!

8. Grammar/Nuts & Bolts

Very rarely, you will be asked a **question on the grammar of a part of a passage**—like identifying what word an adjective is modifying. Very specific questions about the meter of a poem (i.e. iambic pentameter) would also fall into this category. These questions are not so much about literary artistry and more about the dry technique requisite for a fluent command of the English language.

Example:

40. In line 38, “tranquil” functions as which of the following?

- (A) An adjective modifying “I” (line 36)
- (B) An adverb modifying “behold” (line 36)
- (C) An adjective modifying “sunbeams” (line 37)
- (D) An adjective modifying “muse” (line 38)
- (E) An adverb modifying “muse” (line 38)

Explanation:

The section of the poem concerned reads, “Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon, / Whilst through my half-clos’d eye-lids I behold / The sunbeams dance, like diamond, on the main, / And tranquil muse upon tranquility.”

What a mouthful! If we can untangle this sentence, figuring out what “tranquil” is modifying will be fairly easy. First, though, we can eliminate all answers that call “tranquil” an adverb, because the adverb form of “tranquil” is “tranquilly.” Eliminate (B) and (E).

In the sentence, we have that the speaker (“I”) is beholding the sunbeams dancing. Then we have “and” followed by another verb in “muse.” How do we know “muse” is a verb here? Because otherwise the clause “and tranquil muse upon tranquility” has no verb and makes no sense. Since “muse” is a verb, it can’t be modified by an adjective, so eliminate choice (D). This leaves (A) and (C). Does it make sense for “sunbeams” to muse upon tranquility? Not particularly; it makes much more sense for the speaker (I) to muse upon tranquility. Choice (A) is the correct answer.



So are these sunbeams dancing?

How to Prepare for AP Literature Multiple Choice

I have several tips on how you can best position yourself for success on the AP Lit multiple-choice section.

Read a Variety of Literary Works and Poems

Because the passages on the AP Literature multiple-choice section come from a variety of eras, genres, authors, and styles, **it's important to familiarize yourself with a wide variety of English literary styles** so that you will feel comfortable with the passages and able to parse what they are saying without becoming overwhelmed. So read a lot of everything: prose of course, but poetry in particular, as many students are less familiar with poetry already and poetry can be fairly opaque and hard to analyze. As a starting place for things you could read, see my [ARTICLE ON BOOKS](#).

When you start to feel comfortable with the language of many eras and styles, it's time to work on honing your close-reading skills.

Hone Your Close Reading Skills

Your ability to read closely—to read passages not just for comprehension but with an eye for how the author uses literary technique—is paramount on the multiple-choice section. You will practice on close-reading prose and poetry in class, but extra practice can only help you. So when you're doing all of your reading from different eras and genres, **think about what the author is doing and why he or she is doing it.** What techniques are being deployed? What motifs and themes are there? How are characters portrayed?

If you're stumped as to how to go about this, here are some **prose close-reading resources:**

- You can get close-reading guides online from [The University of Wisconsin-Madison's writing center](#) and [the Harvard College Writing Center](#).
- The Purdue OWL also has an article on [steering clear of close-reading "pitfalls."](#)

Here are some **close-reading resources for poetry:**

- Here's [a poetry reading guide from The University of Wisconsin-Madison](#).
- You should definitely check out this truly excellent [guide to reading poetry](#) from Poets.org, which comes complete with two poetry close-readings.

Learn Literary and Poetic Devices

You'll want to be familiar with a literary terms so that any questions that ask about them will make sense to you. Again, you'll probably learn most of these in class, but it doesn't hurt to brush up on them.

Here are some **comprehensive lists of literary terms with definitions:**

- [About.com Literary Glossary](#)
- [Literary-Devices.Com list](#), which even has examples!

Complete Practice Questions and Take Practice Multiple-Choice Sections

To succeed on the multiple-choice section, practice taking multiple-choice questions! This may seem like a no-brainer but it's still very important nonetheless. **Set aside time to take a sizeable number of practice questions every week.** Keep track of what kinds of questions are easy for you—do you identify the theme every time?—and which ones are hard—stumped by similes? This will help you figure out if there are any skills or concepts you need to brush up on.

You should also **take a complete multiple-choice practice section at least once**, twice if you are able. You could do this as part of a complete practice test (which I recommend) or do it separately. But taking a multiple-choice section under AP-like conditions will help you feel prepared, calm and collected on test day.