Essay #1: The Dreaded Poetry Essay

Tips on How to “Ace” the Poetry Essay
2015-2016
AP Literature and Composition
Why the poetry essay?

➤ This essay response shows your ability to:

➤ Close read a piece of literature

➤ Analyze literary techniques and devices the poet uses to achieve his/her purpose

➤ Think critically!
Steps and Timing

- STEP #1: Read and “work the prompt” (1-3 minutes)
- STEP #2: Read and take margin notes (5 minutes)
- STEP #3: Prepare to write (10 minutes)
- STEP #4: Write essay (20 minutes)
- STEP #5: Proofread (3 minutes)
Step #1: Read & “Work” the Prompt

- Read the prompt carefully. Underline exactly what it is asking you to do.
- Know what you should be looking for as you read the poem.
- The prompt is your GUIDE to the poem and your essay. (They do NOT always instruct.)
- General vs. Specific prompts
- “Title is vital”
Types of Questions

- How does the language of the poem reflect the speaker’s perceptions, and how does that language determine the reader’s perception?
- How does the poet reveal the character?
- Discuss the similarities and differences between two poems. Consider, style and theme.
- Contrast the speakers’ views toward a subject in two poems. Refer to form, tone, and imagery.
- Discuss how poetic elements, such as language, structure, imagery, and point of view, convey meaning in a poem.
- Given two poems, discuss what elements make one better than the other.
- Relate the imagery, form, or theme of a particular section of a poem to another part of the same poem. Discuss changing attitude or perception of speaker or reader.
- Discuss the way of life revealed in the poem. Refer to such poetic elements as tone, imagery, symbol, and verse form.
- Discuss the poet’s changing reaction to the subject developed in the poem.
- Discuss how the form of the poem affects its meaning.
Prompt: In “On the Subway”, Sharon Olds brings two worlds into close proximity. Identify the contrasts that develop both portraits in the poem and discuss the insights the narrator comes to as a result of the experience. Refer to such literary techniques as tone, poetic devices, imagery, and organization.

What is the task? What are you required to do?
Step #2: Close Read the Poem

➤ Think about what the prompt is asking you to look for in the poem. (Not always limited!)

➤ Suggestions on how to read the poem:
  ➤ Read to get the gist of the poem
  ➤ Reread using highlighting and marginal notes
  ➤ Read slowly as if speaking aloud
  ➤ Reread to confirm you understand the full impact of the poem

➤ Choose a close reading strategy and stick to it! (TPCASTT, Margin notes, T-Charts, Underlining, etc.)
Step #2: Close Read the Poem

- General things to look for:
  - Purpose
  - Tone
  - Audience
  - POV
  - Structure
  - Shifts!!!!
Step #2: Close Read the Poem

- Specific things to look for:
  - Comparisons (Simile/Metaphor)
  - Denotative vs. Connotative Meanings
  - Imagery
  - Paradox
  - Repetition
  - Contrast
  - Hyperbole/Understatement
  - Personification
  - Rhyme
  - Death is like never being born
Step #3: Outline Your Essay

» Just as critical as steps 1-2

» Questions to ask yourself:

« FIRST: “What does the poem mean?”

« THEN: “What message does the author have for the reader?”

« FINALLY: “How is that message delivered?”

» Device —> Meaning

» Chronology (SHIFTS!)

» Thesis (Make points you can argue)

» Evidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Device</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>Emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperbole</td>
<td>Irony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Romanticize</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Step #3: Outline Your Essay**

Example of Evidence Collection:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Light Imagery</th>
<th>Dark Imagery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“and I am white”</td>
<td>“black sneakers”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“how easy this white skin makes my life”</td>
<td>“moving through darkness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“laced with white”</td>
<td>“black cotton”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“heat of the sun”</td>
<td>“profit from his darkness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“thrust up into any available light”</td>
<td>“he is black”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“rod of light”</td>
<td>“dark and fluid”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“murderous beams”</td>
<td>“murderous beams”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment: The use of black and white imagery emphasizes the opposite ends of the spectrum represented by the speaker and the boy.
Step #4: Write Your Essay

Opening Paragraph

- Establish the direction and tone of essay
- Gives guidelines for the development
- Connect writer to the reader
- Do not need to be lengthy

Questions to ask yourself:

- Have I included the poet and title?
- Have I addressed the ________________ (character/setting/plot)?
- Have I specifically mentioned ____________________ (literary techniques/devices)?
EX1: Sharon Olds in her poem, “On the Subway”, presents a brief encounter between two people of different races which leads to several insights of one participant. This is accomplished through Olds’s use of poetic devices, imagery, and organization.

EX2: The observer and the observed. One has control over the other. In her poem, “On the Subway”, Sharon Olds asks her readers to enter the mind of a white woman who observes a young, black man as they travel together, neither knowing the other. Using poetic devices, imagery, and organization, Olds takes the reader on a ride through the contrasts and images that spark the imagination of the white onlooker.
Step #4: Write Your Essay

Body Paragraphs

- Make clear connections to the thesis
- Use specific references and details from the poem (NEVER EVER EVER SUMMARIZE OR PARAPHRASE)
- Use “connective tissue” to establish adherence to the question
- YES! You can do two longer ones

STRUCTURE:

- Topic Sentence (introduce argument)
- Context (introduce evidence)
- Analysis (MOST IMPORTANT!)
Step #4: Write Your Essay

Body Paragraph Example

The images in the poem are predominately drawn from the contrast between light and dark. “Black sneakers,” “white laces,” “rod of light rapidly moving through darkness” are all images that immediately establish the contrast that is at the heart of the meaning of the poem. This juxtaposition becomes reality in lines 21-22 when we learn that “he is black and I am white.” The problem is how the “white” profits from his “darkness.” What should be light, “the beams of the nation’s heart,” is murderous and he “as black cotton,” absorbs this heat. This angry contrast leads the speaker to her insight about her life in lines 26-28. Empathizing with the black youth, the narrator moves beyond prejudice and finds promise in the last three lines which see the dark being born into the light.
Step #4: Write Your Essay

Conclusion

- Take a step back and glean a new meaning from the poem.
- You NEED a conclusion even if it is only 1-2 sentence(s).

Example: Overall, this poem effectively contrasts the two people and exposes a fallacy of society. The black man must live in eternal darkness because he is never allowed to “thrust up into any available light.”
Let’s Review!

› Review poetic devices and techniques.
› Become familiar with types of poetry prompts.
› “Work” the prompt to make certain you are aware of required tasks.
› Time your essay carefully.
› Read the poem a couple of times.
› Spend sufficient amount of time close reading the poem and preparing an outline before writing.
› Create a strong intro, including the prompt information.
› Refer to the poem often.
› Always stay on topic (AVOID PARAPHRASING)
› Include transition (Think Shifts!)
› Practice! Practice! Practice!