

English Literature and Composition

Focus Sheet

Combining Sentences

One way to improve the fluency of your writing is to vary your sentence length and structure. An effective way to do this is to take two or more simple sentences and combine them into one longer complex or compound sentence. For example:

NO: Shannon is athletic. She likes to play sports.

YES: Shannon, **who** is athletic, likes to play sports.

Two particularly effective ways to combine sentences are using semicolons and using coordinating conjunctions.

Semicolons

Use semicolons in place of a period to link closely related ideas.

They can be used instead of a conjunction.

They can be used to link two previously independent sentences.

Here's an example of an effectively used semicolon:

That play was incredibly popular; millions went to see it.

Coordinating Conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions can be used to show a relationship between ideas.

Coordinating conjunctions include: **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.**

Coordinating conjunctions connect two independent clauses (ones that can stand on their own), and they always come after a comma.

Here are some examples of different uses of this structure.

Gangsters often supplied and transported liquor into the cities, **and** corruption dominated local and national politics.

The publication of *A Room of One's Own* was a feminist landmark, **but** many critics disparaged its importance.

There's no tradition of tattoos in America, **yet** a steadily increasing number of individuals, especially youths, are getting emblazoned with these marks for life.

Comma Splice

Although combining sentences can improve your fluency, you need to be careful to avoid making a **comma splice** error. This occurs when you use a comma to join two complete or independent clauses. For example:

NO: I enjoy eating, I enjoy camping.

YES: I enjoy eating, **and** I enjoy camping.

Remember that if you cover up the comma and each of the two parts of the sentence can stand on its own, you're making a comma splice error. They need to be connected with a semicolon or coordinating conjunction.

English Literature and Composition

Focus Sheet

Evaluating Good Writing

How effective is your writing? Asking questions from the five categories below will help you determine the effectiveness of your writing. These questions can be applied to just about any piece of writing, including essays you write for the AP Exam.

Responsiveness

- Does your essay respond thoroughly to the specific terms of the question?
- Does your composition reflect that you've understood completely what the question asks?
- Do you provide enough details and evidence to make your argument convincing?
- Do you comment on your examples, explaining how they relate to your main idea?
- Do you spend too much space dwelling on the obvious and too little on points that require explanation, definition, or illustration?

Thesis

- Is your essay focused on a clear, consistent, conceptual center?
- Does your thesis explain why you're writing and why a reader should care about the particular issue you address?
- Is your claim complicated and arguable, rather than neutral or so obvious that it doesn't need any explanation?

Support

- Do you provide ample support for your claim?
- Do you express supporting evidence clearly?
- Do you make quotation (or evidence) "sandwiches," introducing each quotation with your own words and following it with your own commentary?
- Do you convey supporting evidence logically, so as to build a coherent composition?

Unity

- Do all the supporting points in your essay clearly relate to a well-defined thesis?
- Does your essay avoid confusing detours unrelated to the thesis? In other words, do all the essay parts form a unified whole?
- Do your transitions clearly connect the supporting points in your essay?

Style

- Are your sentences all structured the same way? (If they're all the same length or the same structure, you should vary them.)
- Are you writing in a voice appropriate for your audience?
- Are you expressing your ideas in clear language, with minimal conventional errors?
- Are you following common grammar and spelling conventions?
- Do grammatical, spelling, or mechanical problems confuse the clarity of your argument?

English Literature and Composition

Study Sheet

Writing About Literature

When you read a work of literature you're not reading to discover one correct meaning the writer has pre-determined for the work. The "meaning" of a literary text is actually something much more personal to the reader. The same poem, for example, might elicit a different response from each person who reads it. This isn't to say a work can mean whatever you want it to mean. Ultimately, your interpretation must be consistent with the thematic suggestions, imagery, and symbolic signals in the text.

When you write about a literary work, your goal is to articulate your own interpretation of the text while backing up your ideas with evidence from the text itself. That is, you must support each point you make with appropriate references to the work. This type of writing, known as **persuasive** or **argumentative writing**, is the primary mode you'll practice in the course.

Different modes exist for writing about literature, as outlined in the chart below. Since dialogue is a unique mode that can be considered a subset of narration or description, it's sandwiched between the two.

Mode	Definition	Examples	Tips in Writing
Description	Picturing an item in words	Textbooks, short stories, novels	Use vivid diction. Describe completely but with appropriate details only.
Dialogue	What people say, written conversation	Plays	Listen to people's conversation, recognizing the difference between written and spoken expression.
Narration	Recounts an event or tells a story, often in chronological order	Stories, fables	Clearly relate purpose or message. Create realistic characters and dialogue. Follow logical time sequence.
Persuasion or Argument	Rationalization for a particular course of action	Essays, treatises, editorials	Support views with documented evidence. Know the audience and anticipate opposition. Avoid logical fallacies.
Exposition	Intends to explain or inform	Encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks	Use sufficient, relevant examples. Organize details coherently.

A good piece of writing often uses all of these modes. A novel for example, tells a story, but includes narration, dialogue (to help reveal characters), and persuasion to advocate themes.

How do you know what type of writing to use under what circumstances? The answer to this question often comes directly from the question, or writing prompt, you're given. The first word of an essay prompt should tip you off about what's expected. The chart on the following page includes words you may find in writing prompts. Understanding what they mean before you come across them, especially on a timed test, will give you a huge head start.

**English Literature and Composition
Study Sheet
Writing About Literature**

Direction in Prompt	Meaning
Analyze	Separate into parts to study why or how
Characterize	Reveal the character
Compare or contrast	Show similarities and differences
Convey	Explain thoroughly
Discuss	Describe and relate features of
Explain	Reveal aspects of
Identify	Point out the features of
Illustrate	Describe the aspects of
Reflect	Consider thoroughly the aspects of
Prove	Show reasons why
Show	Provide examples of
Support	State reasons for and examples of

You may want to print this chart and keep it in your notebook or by your computer. Get to know the prompts well. When writing under time constraints, you might forget what a prompt means or how to address it.

What if you're not given a writing prompt? You might consider one of the following approaches as a beginning point for interpreting a literary work:

- You might trace the critical or popular reception to a work, or compare two works by a single writer or different writers.
- You might examine the relationship between a work of literature and a literary movement or historical period.
- You might analyze a character's motives, the relationships between characters, or a literary work's setting or tone.
- You might examine the author's style, commenting on how he or she uses the resources of language to communicate his or her message.

Regardless of the writing mode you use, the type of prompt given, or the approach you choose on your own, all writing benefits from the following principles:

- Adhere to the conventions of standard written English, including grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and usage.
- Plan before you begin writing.
- Know your audience and the purpose of the piece.
- Use appropriate diction and words correctly.
- Offer variety in your sentence structure.
- Use a clear, original voice that gives readers a reason to read.
- Stay focused to ensure unity and coherence.
- Develop your writing fully, with adequate support for the assertions you make.

Here are some specific rules for writing about literature that will help you produce effective arguments and interpretations.

- Use present-tense verbs when discussing literary works, even when the work itself is written in the past tense. For example, you could write: "By the end of *Hamlet*, Ophelia *is* insane, but we can see that her insanity *is* selective."
- Use past-tense verbs only when discussing historical events: For example, you could write: "It's believed that *Hamlet* *was* written after *Julius Caesar*." Or, when identifying

English Literature and Composition

Study Sheet

Writing About Literature

events that occurred prior to the time of the story's main action, you could write: "Since his father *died*, Hamlet is prone to argument with his mother, the queen."

- Support all points you make with specific, concrete examples from the work you're discussing. Be sure to quote accurately and enclose the words of others in quotation marks. Avoid spending your time writing plot summary—this weakens a good paper because it takes time away from your analysis. Always assume your reader has read the text and doesn't need it summarized. Your goal instead is to draw a conclusion about the text and then support that conclusion with pertinent details.
- Acknowledge all sources you use, including the work or works under discussion.
- Avoid subjective expressions like "it seems to me," or "in my opinion." These weaken your paper by suggesting its ideas are "only" your opinion and have no validity in themselves. Also, words like "seems" give the appearance that you're unsure about what you see in a text.
- Use literary terms accurately. For example, be careful not to confuse *narrator* or *speaker* with *author*. Feelings or opinions expressed by a narrator or character do not necessarily represent those of the author.

These tips will help you shape your writing into polished prose. Remember that sloppy writing can obscure good ideas. Keep these rules for writing about literature in mind, and you'll be able to produce clear, well-crafted written work.