

English Literature and Composition

Focus Sheet

Prompt Analysis: AP Question 3

Question 3 on the AP English Literature and Composition Exam asks you to use a full-length play or novel of recognized literary merit to discuss a core idea. This Focus Sheet will help you dissect what a typical Question 3 involves and give you a process for tackling such a question on Exam day. As you read through this Focus Sheet, notice the underlined sentences; they indicate things you might want to do as you begin formulating your answer to Question 3.

Sample Question 3

Frequently in literature, a character from humble beginnings achieves something great. In many cases, the process through which the character achieves something matters more than the specific achievement. Write an essay in which you identify a character's achievement and explain how the process the character undergoes in reaching that achievement enriches the work as a whole. Don't merely summarize plot.

One question that may come to mind after you've read this sample prompt is "What exactly *is* the question?" There's never a question stated outright in a Question 3 prompt. Instead, it's your job to find the core idea and figure out how to respond to it.

To find the core idea in this sample Question 3, let's start by looking closely at the first sentence.

Introducing the general subject

Usually, the first sentence (and occasionally the second one as well) is an introductory sentence. In this case it's true—the first sentence signals that the general subject is "a character from humble beginnings" who "achieves something great."

Start thinking about one or more literary characters who match this description.

Narrowing the focus

The second sentence here narrows the focus toward the core idea in the prompt. The clause "the process through which the character achieves something matters more than the specific achievement" reveals one key issue on which you need to focus your discussion: the process a character undergoes that leads to achieving something great.

Ask yourself, "Among the characters I'm thinking about, for which one(s) can I write most intelligently about the process the character undergoes to achieve something great?"

Defining the core idea

The third sentence in the sample prompt begins with "Write an essay..." (another common start for this sentence is "In a well-organized essay..."). This sentence states the core idea to which you must respond: "explain how the process the character undergoes in reaching that achievement enriches the work as a whole." Analyzing this clause, you'll find you need to do three things:

Identify the achievement

English Literature and Composition
Focus Sheet
Prompt Analysis: AP Question 3

Identify the process
Explain how the process enriches the work as a whole

Ask yourself, "For any work I'm thinking of using, can I do all three of these things?"

If you find it difficult to answer this question—good. It's more challenging than it first appears. Let's break the core-idea sentence into its components and analyze each one.

Identifying a great achievement

The first of the three core tasks is straightforward: you need to identify the character's great achievement.

Be sure you can write knowledgeably about a character's great achievement.

Identifying the character's process

The second task you face in this sample prompt is to think and then write about the character's process of development. What's a good way to think about the process through which your character achieves something great? This is where your in-depth knowledge of a work will help you think and write.

Instead of focusing merely on plot, think and then write about ideas—answer the question "What ideas matter to this character's process of achievement?"

Perhaps the process has different elements or parts depending on the character's stage of development. Perhaps thinking about intangible elements such as memory, perception, attitude, motivation, or interaction with others can help you define a process through which your character achieves great things.

Ask yourself, "What are the different stages in my character's process of change?"

Explaining how the process enriches the work

The third and most important task you're given in the core-idea sentence is to "explain how the process the character undergoes in reaching that achievement enriches the work as a whole."

Let's break this sentence down further. This time, we'll look at the end of the sentence first.

The phrase "enriches the work as a whole" is AP Exam language for "contributes to a theme." Phrases with a similar meaning include "adds to the value of the work," "is central to the value of the work," and "contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole." These are all ways of asking you to discuss a theme in the work.

English Literature and Composition
Focus Sheet
Prompt Analysis: AP Question 3

This is such an important piece of your prompt analysis that you should think about and decide on a theme right after you've settled on a character, great achievement, and process. Ask yourself, "To what theme does the process contribute?"

The first part of this sentence directs you to "explain how"—this means, although it doesn't explicitly say so, that you must illustrate something by using specific literary techniques (for example, figurative language or characterization) from the work. The "something" you must illustrate is how the character's process of development contributes to the theme.

So, once you've picked a theme to discuss, choose a literary technique (or techniques) that illustrates how the character's process of achievement contributes to your chosen theme.

Putting it all together

If you follow these steps, you'll have a game plan for responding well to Question 3 prompts. Let's recap what this sample Question 3 asks. Once you've narrowed your choice of work and character a bit, your job is to break the core-idea sentence into four sequential tasks, as follows:

1. Identify a character's achievement of something great
2. Identify the process through which the character achieves the great thing
3. Identify a theme to which this character's process of achievement contributes
4. Identify a literary technique that illustrates both the character's process and how that process contributes to the work's theme

Once you've identified the key ideas and evidence you need, and perhaps written a few brief notes, you're ready to write a brief outline and then your response to the prompt. In your response, make sure you use examples of literary techniques taken from the full-length work to illustrate the process of achievement and to explain how that process contributes to theme.

Remember, this process becomes easier with repetition, so be sure to practice.