

AP Language and Composition Exam Multiple Choice Strategies

General Information

Section I, Multiple Choice, typically has between 50 and 60 questions—with 5 choices each—divided among 4 or 5 passages. This section counts for 45 percent of your total score and you have 60 minutes to complete it. The AP Program reuses a set of multiple-choice “equating” questions each year. These questions come from a previous AP Exam—not necessarily from the most recent one. This method is how the College Board can compare one group of students with the next year’s, and it is also why students are required to sign an agreement agreeing not to disclose any information from the MC section after the test.

The MC questions require the ability to:

- Analyze rhetorical and linguistic choices
- Identify stylistic effects that result from word choice
- Critically examine prose selections
- Understand an author’s meaning and purpose
- Recognize structural organization
- Evaluate legitimacy and purpose of sources
- Comprehend rhetorical modes
- Analyze syntax, figurative language, style, and tone

Beginning with the May 2007 AP Exam, some multiple-choice questions will ask students to identify elements of footnotes and bibliographical citations: not whether a comma or period goes between author and title but, for example, what the footnote reference is indicating about the original publication. At least one passage in the multiple-choice section will come from a published work that includes footnotes or a bibliography; the documentation questions will be based on these passages.

Parts of a Multiple-Choice Question

The entire question is called an *item*. The *stem* is the part of the item that asks the question (e.g., “The tone of the passage is best described as...”) The *options* are the five answer choices. The *key* is the correct answer. The *distracters* are the incorrect answer choices.

Analyzing MC Question Types:

Learning to distinguish among the different types of multiple choice questions is a valuable skill for improving your score. Here are the most common types of comprehension questions from the multiple choice section of the exam:

- **Main Idea Questions:** These very common questions measure your ability to identify the author’s ideas, attitudes, and tone. They may also ask you to identify the subject of the passage or determine which choice best tells what the passage is about. Often, these questions require you to make an inference based on facts that

you have to piece together from the passage. Main idea questions usually include one of these key words: *think, predict, indicate, feel, probably, seem, imply, suggest, assume, infer, and most likely*.

- **Rhetoric Questions:** Rhetoric questions, which are also very common, ask about syntax, point of view, or figurative language. To answer these you must be able to recognize these elements and understand their effect on the entire passage.
- **Mode Questions:** Occasionally, the exam will feature one or more questions that require you to recognize the differences among the various rhetorical modes writers apply, including narration, exposition, description, and persuasion.
- **Definition Questions:** These are basically vocabulary questions about difficult words in a passage or about ordinary words used in unfamiliar ways. The key with these questions is to read the surrounding sentences to decipher the meaning of the word from the context of the passage.
- **Tone or Purpose Questions:** These frequently asked questions require you to determine how or why the author wrote the material. Remember, tone reflects the writer's attitude toward the audience and/or subject, and purpose defines the effect the author wants to have on the audience. Writers convey purpose through their use of words (diction), images, and the impression those words and images create. Think of tone as "the expression on the face of the words."
- **Form Questions:** A writer's method of organizing material in a particular sequence is known as form. Be aware of structure, organization, and development. Some writer's use only one form, while others combine many forms of development, i.e., comparison/contrast, cause and effect, chronological order, order of importance, problem-solution, a series of examples, spatial order, etc.
- **English Language Questions:** These questions may test your knowledge of grammar, punctuation, or mechanics, or they may test your understanding of literary terminology.

Strategies for Improving Your Score:

A. Educated Guessing:

It is okay not to finish this section; you can still get a 4 or 5 if you don't finish. In fact, very few students answer all of the questions correctly. Don't guess blindly because there is a ¼-point deduction for wrong answers. The College Board suggests "educated guessing" if you know something about a question and can eliminate one or more obviously incorrect answer choices. You can leave as many as 20 questions blank and still earn a high score so long as you do well on the essays. Take a look at the chart below to see possible score distributions for a 55-question multiple choice section.

POSSIBLE SCORE DISTRIBUTION FOR A 55-QUESTION MULTIPLE CHOICE SECTION					
SCORE = 5		SCORE = 4		SCORE = 3	
MC	ESSAYS (3)	MC	ESSAYS (3)	MC	ESSAYS (3)
25	25 (8.33)	25	21 (7)	25	14 (4.66)
30	23 (7.66)	30	19 (6.33)	30	12 (4)
35	21 (7)	35	17 (5.66)	35	10 (3.33)
40	19 (6.33)	40	15 (5)	40	8 (2.66)
45	17 (5.66)	45	13 (4.33)	45	6 (2)

B. Leaving Questions Blank:

This strategy may seem counter-intuitive, but for some students it can make a difference of several points on the composite score—in other words, the difference between AP credit and no college credit for the exam. If you are consistently getting 35 or more multiple-choice questions correct on a practice AP Language exams that have between 50-54 questions, you are okay in not leaving any blank. For students who are getting less than 35 correct, that is not the case. Here are several examples:

Student A--when answering all questions for all passages--consistently got 20-25 correct in practice and missed the remainder she guessed at resulting in a raw score of 18 [25 correct – ($\frac{1}{4} \times 28 = 7$)]. Using a strategy of purposely skipping the most difficult passage, she divided her time into thirds, 20 minutes per passage. She increased her number of correct answers in this way, getting 32 correct. She left 16 blank and got 5 wrong, so her MC was 32 - 1 or 31 X the multiplier. She went from a projected 2 in March to a 4 in May.

Student B—Student B was consistently getting about 20 correct. Therefore his strategy required him to leave a lot of MC questions blank. Why? If a student gets 20 correct and leaves 32 blank, then the score is 20 - 0. If the same student answers the remaining 32 questions incorrectly, the score is 20 - 8 or 12 x the multiplier. In other words, for students who are really challenged on the MC, the best option is to leave many blank.

C. Setting Priorities and Pacing Yourself:

Depending on whether there are 4 or 5 passages, you will want to average between 11-14 minutes on each section. Your instinct might be to open to the first question and hurriedly dive in so you can get to all 50+ questions. This is NOT the best approach for most students. Instead, begin by taking 4-5 minutes to quickly peruse each of the passages; then rank order them by level of difficulty, with the easiest being first, etc. Start with the easiest passage and work as efficiently as you can; check your time at the end of each passage to see if you are on track or going over. Remember, you can do these passages in any order you

want and you can skip any passages and questions you want. There is no point deduction for not answering a question, so beginning with the easier questions will give you the greatest opportunity to attempt the highest number of questions. Remember to skip a question if you cannot eliminate two of the 5 choices; you should return to the questions you skipped at the end of this section if time allows. If you are running out of time as you approach the final section, look at the questions for the section and search for vocabulary or terminology questions. Often these questions can easily be answered by examining a word or phrase from the passage without reading the entire selection.