

Prestwick House Pre-AP: Readings and Exercises

Dealing with Meaning (not theme)

CHAPTER 1

IF YOU'RE READING THIS SENTENCE, you're probably planning to take an Advanced Placement English exam (Advanced Placement in English Language and Composition or Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition) in a year or two. Since an Advanced Placement course is, theoretically, a college-level course, preparing for an AP exam requires you to build a pretty extensive body of knowledge and develop some new mental skills, habits, and attitudes.

The first of those mental attitudes is the realization that reading is as much about—probably more about—determining what the author intended than it is about expressing what the reader finds. Consider the following sentences, from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address:

It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.

The *this* is the dedication of part of the Gettysburg battlefield as a national cemetery for fallen Civil War soldiers. What Lincoln is saying (using two rhetorical devices, *anaphora* and *climax*) is that (1) it is right for them to dedicate this land as a cemetery, (2) but the persons gathered at this occasion are not really able to make the ground any more holy than (3) the soldiers who fought there already did.

When Lincoln first delivered this speech, it was criticized for being too brief and too “ineloquent.” Critics thought its language was too simple. If there were any Southern sympathizers in Lincoln's audience, they would most likely have listened, bitterly recalling the devastating Confederate defeat that occurred at this battlefield. Those who had lost loved ones in the battle might have felt Lincoln's

words did not even come close to expressing their grief. Every single listener would have brought his or her own feelings and thoughts to the speech.

But whether they agreed or disagreed with Lincoln; whether they were inspired, angered, or bored; whether they fought in the battle, knew someone who did, or had never even heard of the battle until that morning, is all irrelevant. Not one listener's or reader's attitude changes what the sentence means, what Lincoln intended.

When you sit down to take your Advanced Placement exam, you will not be asked for your *reaction* to any text you've read or they give you to read. You will be asked to deal with *what* the text means and *how* the author conveys that meaning to his or her readers.

Your first new habit, then, is to read to figure out *what the text means*.

The first step in figuring out what the text means is to examine each individual word, to know what the author is saying by knowing what the words he or she is using really mean.

Issues of Comprehension: Denotation

Consider the following from the opening of O. Henry's famous short story, "The Gift of the Magi":

Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied.

O. Henry (his real name was William Sydney Porter) was a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writer, and modern readers are often put off by his frequent use of words and phrases that aren't used all that much anymore. Part of the problem is, of course, that readers simply do not know what these unfamiliar words mean. They may be able to infer their meaning from the context, but their guess—while close—is not likely to perfectly match the actual, literal dictionary definition—the denotation—of the word. The result is a less-than-perfect understanding of the sentence, the paragraph, the story in which the unfamiliar word is used.

This less-than-perfect understanding might be fine for a recreational reader, someone who just wants to enjoy the story. If you want to construct a valid interpretation, perform an analysis, maybe even offer an evaluation of the story, you need a better than less-than-perfect understanding. You need as close-to-perfect an understanding as you can achieve.

And sometimes, that means you have to look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary to learn what they *really* mean, not simply what you *think* they mean. When we consult a dictionary (in this case I'm looking at the *Webster's New Explorer College Dictionary* 2003), we find that

- *to impute* can mean both "to accuse or blame" and "to give credit for";
- *parsimony* means "stinginess" (if you guessed, perhaps, poverty, you would actually have been wrong);
- *close* (probably the easy one you thought you didn't have to look up!) means "reluctant to give up money or possessions" (not "near" or "precise" or anything like that).

So, a quick glance at a dictionary to make sure we know what the words in the story *really mean* tells us that the person in the above quoted "sentence" is embarrassed (her cheeks are burning) because the grocer, butcher, and vegetable man are silently *accusing* her of being *stingy* because she is so obviously *unwilling to part with her money*.

She's not embarrassed that she's poor.

If you were writing an essay for an AP exam, that would be an important distinction to be able to make. Let's look at the entire story and see how an appreciation of a word's *denotation* is often an essential first step toward really understanding the story.

After the story, you'll find some sample multiple-choice and free-response questions similar to the ones that could be on an AP exam. Because we're focusing on word meanings at this point, that will also be the focus of the questions—but, on the actual exam, questions will not be grouped thematically or topically like that. (Just so you know.)

The Gift of the Magi

O. HENRY (1862 – 1910)

ONE DOLLAR AND EIGHTY-SEVEN CENTS. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied.¹ Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates² the moral reflection³ that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding⁴ from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly

Sample Student Commentary

¹ You already know that Della is embarrassed by her perceived stinginess, not her perceived poverty.

² To instigate is to "goad or urge." Its negative association, to instigate trouble, is a connotation.

³ Since "instigate" is not denotatively a negative word, it can be used to "goad or urge" something positive like deep, moral consideration.

⁴ Dictionary entries for "subside" include "to settle oneself." Notice that it is Della who is "subsiding," not her sorrow.

4 *beggar* description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the *mendicancy* squad.⁶

5 In the *vestibule*⁷ below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also *appertaining*⁸ thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

6 The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

7 Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and *sterling*⁹—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

8 There was a *pier-glass*¹⁰ between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of *longitudinal*¹¹ strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

9 Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

10 Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his

Sample Student Commentary

⁵ You may feel you know what a *beggar* (noun) is, but in this sentence, "*beggar*" is used as a verb. As a verb, it can mean "to be beyond one's ability or capacity." O. Henry is saying that the apartment is not exactly beyond his ability to describe, but its appearance is *beggarly*. His use of the word here is a sort of pun.

⁶ A *mendicant* is a beggar; the mendicancy squad would be the authorities charged with arresting unlicensed beggars. So, while O. Henry's use of the word *beggar* had nothing to do with poverty, he fully establishes his pun by saying the apartment looked like the home of beggars.

⁷ The vestibule is the lobby.

⁸ To belong or be connected to.

⁹ While it is not one of the top entries, one of the definitions of "*sterling*" is "conforming to the highest standard, of the highest quality." The denotation that best applies to the word's use in something you are reading will often come late in the definition. Resist the temptation to look at the first or second definition and assume you've "got it."

¹⁰ A tall and thin mirror, usually placed on the wall between two windows.

¹¹ "Placed or running lengthwise." The word's association with length (versus width) came long before its association with maps.

grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the *airshaft*,¹² Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to *depreciate*.¹³ Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

10 So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and stinging like a *cascade*¹⁴ of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

11 On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

12 Where she stopped the sign read: "Mne. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie."

13 "Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

14 "I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

15 Down rippled the brown cascade.

16 "Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

17 "Give it to me quick," said Della.

18 Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the *hashed*¹⁵ metaphor.

19 She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

20 She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and *chaste*¹⁶ in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by *meretricious ornamentation*¹⁷—as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

Sample Student Commentary

¹² Not a sheet metal duct, as a modern reader might expect, but a narrow space, almost like a courtyard in the center of the building, that allowed interior apartments to have windows.

¹³ To lower the price or value of something.

¹⁴ A steep and usually small waterfall; also anything that falls or rushes forward in a vast quantity.

¹⁵ To try and picture a chopped-up metaphor does not make much sense. The denotations of "*hash*," however, include "to confuse or muddle" and "to restate what is already known (rehash)."

¹⁶ While the most common denotations of "*chaste*" involve sexual purity, there are dictionary entries that denote "simple, modest, and pure in design."

¹⁷ If you were trying word attack skills to infer the meaning of "*meretricious*," you might decide the words meant something worthy, of merit. Its denotation, however, is actually the opposite—"falsely or misleadingly attractive." *Ornamentation*, of course, is rooted in "*ornament*"—an item or detail for decoration.

- 20 When Della reached home her intoxication¹⁸ gave way a little to prudence¹⁹ and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages²⁰ made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.
- 21 Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant²¹ schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.
- 22 “If Jim doesn’t kill me,” she said to herself, “before he takes a second look at me, he’ll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do—oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?”
- 23 At 7 o’clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.
- 24 Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit of saying a little silent prayer about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: “Please God, make him think I am still pretty.”
- 25 The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two—and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.
- 26 Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail.²² His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments²³ that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly²⁴ with that peculiar expression on his face.
- 27 Della wriggled off the table and went for him.
- 28 “Jim, darling,” she cried, “don’t look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold because I couldn’t have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It’ll grow out again—you won’t mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say ‘Merry Christmas!’ Jim, and let’s be happy. You don’t know what a nice—what a beautiful, nice gift I’ve got for you.”

Sample Student Commentary

- ¹⁸ As we’ve seen a few times already, we have to look beyond the first one or two denotations, which have to do with alcohol. The final notation for “intoxicate” in our Webster’s *New Explorer* reads, “to excite or elate to the point of enthusiasm or frenzy.” The is probably what O. Henry means; not that Della is drunk.
- ¹⁹ The ability to govern and control one’s actions and thoughts by the use of reason.
- ²⁰ “To ravage” means “to destroy or ruin.” As a noun, “ravage” means the “damage or destruction.”
- ²¹ Someone who shirks his or her duty, especially a student who misses school without permission.
- ²² A “setter” is a type of hunting dog. Its chief characteristic is that it sniffs out game and then assumes a posture or “set,” standing absolutely still to help the hunter locate the animal. A quail is a small game bird.
- ²³ The understanding of “sentiment” as an excessive or overly sweet emotion is a connotation. Most of the dictionary entries for “sentiment” have to do with ideas, sensibilities, or opinions prompted or motivated by feelings.
- ²⁴ “To fix” is not only to repair, but also “to set or make stationary.”

- 29 “You’ve cut off your hair?” asked Jim, laboriously²⁵ as if he had not arrived at that patent²⁶ fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.
- 30 “Cut it off and sold it,” said Della. “Don’t you like me just as well, anyhow? I’m me without my hair, ain’t I?”
- 31 Jim looked about the room curiously.
- 32 “You say your hair is gone?” he said, with an air almost of idiocy.
- 33 “You needn’t look for it,” said Della. “It’s sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It’s Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered,” she went on with sudden serious sweetness, “but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?”
- 34 Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny²⁷ some inconsequential²⁸ object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi²⁹ brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.
- 35 Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.
- 36 “Don’t make any mistake, Dell,” he said, “about me. I don’t think there’s anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you’ll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first.”
- 37 White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic³⁰ scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.
- 38 For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted³¹ adornments were gone.
- 39 But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: “My hair grows so fast, Jim!”
- 40 And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, “Oh, oh!”

Sample Student Commentary

- ²⁵ The second dictionary definition denotes “laborious” as meaning “requiring or characterized by hard or toilsome effort.”
- ²⁶ “Patent” has numerous independent entries in the dictionary, each with many definitions. Deep within one of the earlier entries is “evident or obvious.” Remember that the first one or two printed definitions will not necessarily be the most helpful to you.
- ²⁷ Discreet (eet) means subtle, not obvious. A “scrutiny” is a thorough examination or study.
- ²⁸ Unimportant.
- ²⁹ “Magi” is plural for “magus,” a Latin word for a wise man from Persia, a magician.
- ³⁰ You may immediately associate ecstatic with “happy or joyful,” but the denotation of ecstasy is actually, “a state of being beyond reason and self-control; a state of overwhelming emotion.” If O. Henry had meant joyful, Della would be uttering a “joyful scream of joy.”
- ³¹ Because of the Judeo-Christian Tenth Commandment, you might believe that covet means to envy. Its denotation is actually “to desire or wish for.”

- 41 Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.
- 42 "Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."
- 43 Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.
- 44 "Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."
- 45 The magi, as you know, were wise³² men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

Sample Student Commentary

³² Having or showing good judgment. Sensible. If you read "wise" as "smart" or "knowing a lot," you would actually miss the irony.

Sample Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The primary source of irony in this story is the incongruous use of the word
- ecstatic.
 - fixedly.
 - sentiments.
 - beggar.
 - wise.
2. If you were to ignore, or be unaware of, certain key words' denotations, you might misinterpret Della as
- unpredictably emotional.
 - argumentative and envious.
 - thrifty.
 - vain.
 - reasonable.
3. O. Henry's frequent use of absolute, often unfamiliar, denotations contributes to an overall tone of
- comic familiarity.
 - thoughtful seriousness.
 - bitter sarcasm.
 - ironic formality.
 - mocking wit.
4. All of the following are valid inferences from paragraph 38 EXCEPT that Della
- never intended to own the combs.
 - would have envied the woman who bought the combs.
 - appreciated the value of the combs.
 - knew at once the irony of receiving that gift on that day.
 - regretted having sold her hair.
5. Overall, O. Henry's word choice in this story can best be defined as
- archaic.
 - poetic.
 - precise.
 - cavalier.
 - stilted.

Answers and Explanations:

1. While an accurate understanding of O. Henry's point requires the reader to discern the connotations or most familiar denotations of *ecstatic* (A), *fix* (B), and *sentiment* (C) with their less-known denotations, none of these words is used oddly or inexplicably. O. Henry does make a pun employing two denotations of *beggar* (D), but neither use of the word is incongruous; nor can this pun be considered the *primary* source of irony. The entire point of the story, however, hinges on O. Henry's insistence that both the "wonderfully wise" men of the Christmas story brought "wise," or sensible gifts and that the foolish sacrifices of Della and Jim were likewise wise or sensible. **Thus, (E) is the best answer.**
2. Strictly speaking, (A) and (C) are not misinterpretations of Della's character, and the denotations of the words used to describe Della's emotions clearly support these interpretations. While Della is not vain (D), her use of the *pier-glass* (paragraph 7) and her repair of the *ravages* to her beauty (paragraph 20) would not inevitably lead a reader to this conclusion. Likewise, while the overall depiction of Della does not show her to be reasonable (E), it is only in an ironic use of the word *wise* that O. Henry insists that we see her in this light. While O. Henry describes Della's behavior and attitudes with words like *instigates* (paragraph 2) and *coveted* (paragraph 38), these words do not denote the argumentative and envious associations that modern readers attach to them. **Thus (B) is the best answer.**
3. (A) is certainly tempting because there are times when O. Henry addresses his reader directly and intrudes into the narrative with personal observations and comments, but this familiar tone is not strong enough to be considered "comic," and it is achieved more by word choice and narrative structure than by subtleties of word meaning. (B) is also tempting, but can be eliminated by the fact that there are puns and some other word play, and even when the narrator sounds serious, there is a tongue-in-cheek attitude to his asides and observations. (C) is the least tempting of the choices, as none of the words O. Henry uses denotes bitterness, and his irony is not strong enough to be considered sarcasm. (E) might also tempt a few students as O. Henry does employ wit, and there are times when he seems to mock his characters, calling them "foolish children" (paragraph 45) and describing Della's emotional outbursts as characteristic and inevitable (paragraph 27), but neither criticism reaches the severity of true mocking, and this wit is not the overall tone of the piece. The use of phrases like *instigates the moral reflection* (paragraph 2) instead of less formal alternatives like *causes one to think; appertaining thereunto* rather than *attached to which*, and so on, creates a formal, almost academic and detached, tone. This formality is made ironic, however, by the context, which includes the wit, the gentle mockery, and the familiar asides and observations. **Thus, (D) is the best answer.**

4. (A) might tempt some students, but as much as Della "coveted," "craved," and "yearned over" the combs, the reader is told that her desire was "without the least hope of possession." (C) is probably the least tempting because the paragraph clearly states that the combs were expensive and that Della knew it. (D) is eliminated by the two references in the paragraph to her "vanished hair." (E) is possibly tempting, but it is not unreasonable to infer that, in her two realizations that her hair is gone, Della does, at least for a second, regret the hair's loss. Only (B) is not a possible reference. If one believes that *covet* means "to envy," then this choice might tempt. However, knowing that the "coveted combs" are merely the "strongly desired combs" (a reiteration of the fact that Della had "worshipped," "craved," and "yearned over" the combs) eliminates a supposition of envy. **Thus, (B) is the best answer.**
5. Modern readers may be tempted by (A), but it must be remembered that O. Henry was writing over a century ago, and many words that are now archaic were in common use then. (B) is largely eliminated by the reliance on specific denotations. (D) is likewise eliminated by O. Henry's reliance on the literal dictionary definitions of key words rather than slang or colloquial understandings. (E) might tempt some who simply do not like the writing of an earlier style, but as O. Henry does achieve some wit, humor, and irony, his writing can hardly be dismissed as "stilted." (C), however, is the best answer. O. Henry's choice of words with denotations that often contradict connotative or colloquial understandings and the irony that he creates with these words suggest that he was most careful, almost painstaking in his word choice.

On an actual AP exam, you would never write two essays about the same passage, or even the same piece of literature. We offer these two essays for an example only.

Sample free-response item one (text-based):

Carefully read O. Henry's famous short story, "The Gift of the Magi." Then write an essay in which you analyze how O. Henry uses careful and specific word choice to communicate his narrator's attitude toward the characters.

Do not be misled. This prompt is not inviting you to discuss O. Henry's condescension or sense of amusement at Della and Jim's behavior and attitudes. The scorers of this essay will be looking for an essay about how O. Henry uses language. Let's see how a reasonably good student would answer this question. (Remember that the response is supposed to be an essay.)

Sample Student Essay

In addition to its surprise ending, O. Henry's story "The Gift of the Magi" is famous for the warm-hearted and amused tone that he uses to describe his two characters, James (Jim) and Della Dillingham Young. It is clear that the narrator likes this young couple and that he approves of the sacrifices they make for each other (even though he claims not to and calls them "foolish")! O. Henry communicates this friendly approval to his reader by the specific words and phrases he uses.² He creates irony by using overly formal words when simpler ones might be expected, and he uses vivid images and precise shades of meaning to specify exactly what he wants his reader to notice and to feel.³ "The Gift of the Magi" is an excellent story to study for the importance of careful and purposeful word choice.

From the first paragraph, O. Henry uses highly formal words and expressions to explain simple ideas.⁴ Della is not thrifty, cheap, or stingy; she is parsimonious. The name card is not simply attached to their mailbox, it is described as "appertaining to the mailbox."⁵ Such formal words to describe plain, poor, and simple Jim and Della is ironic. This irony is not criticism, however. It is almost humorous. O. Henry is

Scorer Commentary

- While the prompt does not invite you to describe or analyze O. Henry's attitude, it would be difficult to analyze how he communicates that attitude without mentioning what that attitude was.
- Here's where the student begins to address the assigned topic.
- After a general repetition of the topic in the prompt, the student provides a more specific introduction to what he is going to discuss in his essay.
- First sub-point as promised in the introduction.
- Specific, textual evidence. You simply cannot expect a top score on your essay without it.

not laughing at Jim and Della's poverty, he is laughing with them.⁶ Similarly, when O. Henry says that the couple's furnished flat "beggars[is] description," he is not calling them beggars, but his use of the word emphasizes how poor they are and makes the reader look back to the bargaining and haggling Della must have done with the shop keepers in order to save her \$1.87. Yet, he is careful to note that Della is more embarrassed by the "imputation" of stinginess than of her need to negotiate as she does. "Imputation" instead of accusation or insinuation is another use of a formal word for a simple idea. It makes the charge of stinginess against Della more legal and, therefore, less a judgment on her character.

O. Henry also uses important-sounding phrases⁷ to suggest how he feels about his characters. After we already know that Della and Jim are poor and that Della has scrimped and saved and risked being called stingy in order to amass the grand total of \$1.87 for Jim's Christmas present, O. Henry calls her the "mistress of the home," clearly elevating her status from housewife or even homemaker. One can almost picture the "mistress of the home" lounging on the sofa, eating chocolates, and being pampered by a host of servants. It is important, also, that O. Henry uses the word "home" instead of the more common house. First, this is more accurate, since Jim and Della live in an apartment, a "flat," and not a house. It is also more accurate, however, because poor as they are, and shabby as their apartment must be, it is indeed a home, with everything that that word suggests in terms of love and happiness.⁸

Along those same lines, Jim and Della's use of "Dillingham" on the name card on their mailbox is described as "flung to the breeze," and their reaction to Jim's reduced income is to think "seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D." Again, the word choice and phrasing, which sounds more appropriate for talking about wealthy people, is ironic. At first glance, Jim and Della might sound pretentious, but "flung to the breeze" suggests a carefree act, not a pompous one, and O. Henry dismisses any sense of pretension when he refers to the period when Jim made \$30 a week as "a former period of prosperity." There is definitely more glibness than criticism in O. Henry's choice of phrases.

After Della gets the idea to sell her hair, her actions are described in dazzling, almost magical terms. She "flutters" out the door, with a "whirl of skirts" and a "brilliant sparkle" in her eyes. These strong and vivid words reflect the quality of her heart, not her outward appearance. They also contrast with the "gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard" that describe Della's surroundings, but not Della.

The final significant word choice that reveals O. Henry's affection for these characters actually appears in the title. The "Magi" referred to are the Wise Men

Scorer Commentary

- After the quotations, however, is discussion and explanation of why those quotations are relevant. Both textual evidence and discussion are necessary for a top score.
- The introduction does promise a discussion of both words and phrases.
- This discussion of home versus house fulfills the promise in the introduction to deal with "precise shades of meaning."

of the Christmas story, who traveled to Bethlehem and gave the baby Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. O. Henry relies on our understanding of these men as "wise" when he compares them to Jim and Della. The irony, of course, is that Jim and Della are "foolish" for each sacrificing his or her most prized possession for the other's Christmas gift. Still, O. Henry repeats the word *wise* five times and *wisest* three times. He calls Jim and Della "the wisest" of "all who give and receive gifts." There is no irony here, no criticism, not even any humor; but there is an intentional use of a word open to more than one interpretation. In what way are Della and Jim "wise"? What does *wisdom* mean?

That is, finally, the question raised by the story.

O. Henry calls Jim and Della "two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other," but he has also been careful to make sure the reader knows the "flat" is a "home," and the "children" are a happy, loving couple.

O. Henry follows his observation about Jim and Della's foolishness with a contradiction and a clarification of what he means by *wise*, but he does it in "a last word to the wise of these days." The "wisdom" of "the wise of these days" is the same wisdom that would call Jim's and Della's sacrifices "foolish." However, O. Henry now praises Jim and Della as "the wisest," wise in the same sense that the Magi of the Christmas story were wise. So, at the very end, O. Henry states his approval of Jim and Della, and all of his previous ironic comments and questionable word choices, which could have been read as either critical or humorous, turn out to be intended to be read as amused and approving.¹⁰

Scorer Commentary

⁹ The "wise" – "wisdom" discussion also helps to fulfill the "shades of meaning" promise in the introduction.

¹⁰ The strong conclusion wraps up the discussion and reasserts the original point about O. Henry's careful and deliberate word choice.

Sample free-response item two (Independent)

You will find that this prompt is not terribly different from Sample one. On the actual exam, you will never be asked to write two essays on such similar topics, nor will there be two Free-Response Questions on the same piece of literature. These are offered simply as examples of the two types of question you will face.

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

In addition to these large rules, there are some little ones. These require that the author shall:

- Say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it.
- Use the right word, not its second cousin.

—Mark Twain

Consider the above reflections about the writer's obligation to choose his words carefully. Then select a novel, story, or play in which tone, mood, and meaning are created by the writer's careful and intentional word choice and write an essay analyzing how the author's "using the right word [and] not its second cousin" creates the tone and contributes to the piece's overall meaning.

Again, be careful. If you are tempted to mention O. Henry's tongue-in-cheek humor or mild mockery, do not devote more than a sentence to tone. The prompt is inviting you to write about word choice—how the author creates tone.

You may choose a work from the list that follows or another novel or play of comparable literary merit.

Most of the independent Free-Response questions will provide a list of "suggestions" on which you might choose to write. You are not obligated to write about any of the "suggestions." They are merely provided to help you think of an appropriate story to write about. Our model student has chosen to write about "The Gift of the Magi."

Sample Student Essay

Many people assume that synonyms are different words that "mean the same thing." They consider synonyms to be interchangeable, when in fact, they are not. To use the wrong synonym in a sentence is, I believe, what Mark Twain means when he criticizes using the right word's "second cousin" instead of the right word. The fine distinction between synonyms like fragile and frail might seem unimportant, but paying attention to the exact meaning of each word can make the difference between proper and incorrect, clear and vague, or interesting and dull! The great American short story writer, O. Henry, was a master at conveying very precise meanings and creating vivid moods through careful word choice. The lighthearted tone in which he tells "The Gift of the Magi" is a perfect example.¹ By using strict dictionary definitions of words and letting different meanings play against each other, he makes a story that could be depressing almost humorous. One can almost hear a glint in his eye and see a smile on his face as he tells the story. This is the result of careful word choice.²

Although the story starts out on a sad note—the main character is upset about how little money she has, and she throws herself on the sofa to cry—O. Henry manages to dispel the unhappy mood by describing the couch as "shabby" and Della's crying as "howling!" Considering some of the synonyms O. Henry could have used (threadbare, tattered, or decrepit for "shabby" and wail or sob for "howl"), this word choice creates an image that is almost cute.³ Della's crying also makes O. Henry pause and offer a brief statement about life, what he describes in inflated language, especially when compared to the trivial language of Della's crying, as "a moral reflection." This "reflection," however dismisses life's sorrows—including Della's extreme disappointment—as "sobs [and] sniffles...with sniffles predominating." "Sobs and sniffles" are not nearly as horrible as the hardships or tragedies O. Henry could have mentioned. Even though "sobs" indicates a more serious type of crying than "howl," it is still not as clear or horrible as a disaster or catastrophe.⁴ Clearly the author does not want the reader to be overly moved by Della's sadness. In fact, he almost makes a joke of it.⁵

This tone or attitude is all the result of O. Henry's choice of one word over another with a similar—but significantly different—meaning.⁶

Another word choice technique O. Henry uses is to play with a word that has more than one meaning. After telling the story of Jim and Della's sacrifices for each other, O. Henry calls them both "wise" and "foolish." These are not synonyms: in

fact, they are almost antonyms, but people understand "wise" in so many different ways that what seems "wise" to some may indeed seem "foolish" to others. This is exactly what O. Henry is doing in this story.

He first uses "wise" in relation to Jim and Della when, after identifying the Magi as the Wise Men of the Christmas story, he calls his characters "two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house." Here he clearly describes them as "foolish" and "unwise." However, his next sentence introduces a contradiction, "but in a last word," and this last word of contradiction is directed toward "the wise of these days." The context of the paragraph makes it clear that these "wise" are the ones who would consider Jim and Della "foolish." And this "last word" is "of all who give gifts these two [Jim and Della] were the wisest."⁷

He has just called them "foolish," and now says they were "the wisest." This is a paradox, and it means that, to O. Henry, what the world might consider foolishness is the real wisdom. So he uses "wise" and "foolish" in the same paragraph just as if they were synonyms.⁸ And the mood he creates with this play on words is to make the reader feel happy at the end of a story that could have been very, very sad!^{9,10}

Scorer Commentary

⁵ Plenty of direct textual support. Remember, you cannot hope to receive a high score without supporting everything you say with the text.

⁶ And this student also shares her conclusions. This is also necessary for a top score.

⁷ This sentence restates the assigned topic and begins to deliver on one of the promised subpoints from the introduction.

⁸ This discussion is not too different from the earlier essay, but this point is essential in a discussion about words and word meanings in this story.

⁹ This student has earned very high points for organization by bringing her discussion back to the point on which she began.

¹⁰ The prompt did ask to consider the story's overall meaning, and this essay does not do that, so this is probably not at the absolute top of the grading scale; but it is a thorough, focused, and supported analysis of word choice in the story, so it will receive a high score.

Scorer Commentary

¹ Restating a part of the prompt is a basic, but often effective, way to focus an exam essay.

² As the student was instructed to choose a piece of literature to write about, it is important that she identifies her choice as early as possible in the essay.

³ The thesis statement must address the topic assigned in the prompt.

⁴ Very early on, this student has found a pair of synonyms in order to make sure she really does discuss what was assigned.

Exercise One:

Questions 1–5. Read the following passage carefully before you choose your answers.

Miss Brill

KATHERINE MANSFIELD (1888–1923)

1. **A**LTHOUGH IT WAS SO BRILLIANTLY FINE—the blue sky powdered with gold and great spots of light like white wine splashed over the *Jardins Publiques*!—Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur. The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was just a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water before you sip, and now and again a leaf came drifting—from nowhere, from the sky. Miss Brill put up her hand and touched her fur. Dear little thing! It was nice to feel it again. She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the dim little eyes. “What has been happening to me?” said the sad little eyes. Oh, how sweet it was to see them snap at her again from the red eiderdown!... But the nose, which was of some black composition, wasn’t at all firm. It must have had a knock, somehow. Never mind—a little dab of black sealing-wax when the time came—when it was absolutely necessary... Little rogue! Yes, she really felt like that about it. Little rogue biting its tail just by her left ear. She could have taken it off and laid it on her lap and stroked it. She felt a tingling in her hands and arms, but that came from walking, she supposed. And when she breathed, something light and sad—no, not sad, exactly—something gentle seemed to move in her bosom.

2. There were a number of people out this afternoon, far more than last Sunday. And the band sounded louder and gayer. That was because the Season had begun. For although the band played all the year round on Sundays, out of season it was never the same. It was like some one playing with only the family to listen; it didn’t care how it played if there weren’t any strangers present. Wasn’t the conductor wearing a new coat, too? She was sure it was new. He scraped with his foot and flapped his arms like a rooster about to crow, and the bandmen sitting in the green rotunda blew out their cheeks and glared at the music. Now there came a little “flutey” bit—very pretty!—a little chain of bright drops. She was sure it would be repeated. It was; she lifted her head and smiled.

3. Only two people shared her “special” seat: a fine old man in a velvet coat, his hands clasped over a huge carved walking-stick, and a big old woman, sitting upright, with a roll of knitting on her embroidered apron. They did not speak. This was disappointing, for Miss Brill always looked forward to the conversation. She had become really quite expert, she thought, at listening as though she didn’t listen, at sitting in other people’s lives just for a minute while they talked round her.

4. She glanced, sideways, at the old couple. Perhaps they would go soon. Last Sunday, too, hadn’t been as interesting as usual. An Englishman and his wife, he wearing a dreadful Panama hat and she button boots. And she’d gone on the whole time about how she ought to wear spectacles; she knew she needed them; but that it was no good getting

¹ Public gardens. The story is set in a unnamed town in France on a Sunday afternoon in early autumn.

any; they’d be sure to break and they’d never keep on. And he’d been so patient. He’d suggested everything—gold rims, the kind that curved round your ears, little pads inside the bridge. No, nothing would please her. “They’ll always be sliding down my nose!” Miss Brill had wanted to shake her.

The old people sat on the bench, still as statues. Never mind, there was always the crowd to watch. To and fro, in front of the flower-beds and the band rotunda, the couples and groups paraded, stopped to talk, to greet, to buy a handful of flowers from the old beggar who had his tray fixed to the railings. Little children ran among them, swooping and laughing; little boys with big white silk bows under their chins, little girls, little French dolls, dressed up in velvet and lace. And sometimes a tiny staggerer came suddenly rocking into the open from under the trees, stopped, stared, as suddenly sat down “flop,” until its small high-stepping mother, like a young hen, rushed scolding to its rescue. Other people sat on the benches and green chairs, but they were nearly always the same, Sunday after Sunday, and—Miss Brill had often noticed—there was something funny about nearly all of them. They were odd, silent, nearly all old, and from the way they stared they looked as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards!

Behind the rotunda the slender trees with yellow leaves down drooping, and through them just a line of sea, and beyond the blue sky with gold-veined clouds.

Tum-tum-tum tiddle-um! tiddle-um! tum tiddle-um tum ta! blew the band.

Two young girls in red came by and two young soldiers in blue met them, and they laughed and paired and went off arm-in-arm. Two peasant women with funny straw hats passed, gravely, leading beautiful smoke-coloured donkeys. A cold, pale nun hurried by. A beautiful woman came along and dropped her bunch of violets, and a little boy ran after to hand them to her, and she took them and threw them away as if they’d been poisoned. Dear me! Miss Brill didn’t know whether to admire that or not! And now an ermine toque¹ and a gentleman in grey met just in front of her. He was tall, stiff, dignified, and she was wearing the ermine toque she’d bought when her hair was yellow. Now everything, her hair, her face, even her eyes, was the same colour as the shabby ermine, and her hand, in its cleaned glove, lifted to dab her lips, was a tiny yellowish paw. Oh, she was so pleased to see him—delighted! She rather thought they were going to meet that afternoon. She described where she’d been—everywhere, here, there, along by the sea. The day was so charming—didn’t he agree? And wouldn’t he, perhaps?... But he shook his head, lighted a cigarette, slowly breathed a great deep puff into her face, and even while she was still talking and laughing, flicked the match away and walked on. The ermine toque was alone; she smiled more brightly than ever. But even the band seemed to know what she was feeling and played more softly, played tenderly, and the drum beat, “The Brute! The Brute!” over and over. What would she do? What was going to happen now? But as Miss Brill wondered, the ermine toque turned, raised her hand as though she’d seen someone else, much nicer, just over there, and pattered away. And the band changed again and played more quickly, more gaily than ever, and the old couple on Miss Brill’s seat got up and marched away, and such a funny old man with long whiskers hobbled along in time to the music and was nearly knocked over by four girls walking abreast.

¹ A type of hat.

9 Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all! It was like a play. It was exactly like a play. Who could believe the sky at the back wasn't painted? But it wasn't till a little brown dog trotted on solemn and then slowly trotted off, like a little "theatre" dog, a little dog that had been drugged, that Miss Brill discovered what it was that made it so exciting. They were all on the stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance after all. How strange she'd never thought of it like that before! And yet it explained why she made such a point of starting from home at just the same time each week—so as not to be late for the performance—and it also explained why she had quite a queer, shy feeling at telling her English pupils how she spent her Sunday afternoons. No wonder! Miss Brill nearly laughed out loud. She was on the stage. She thought of the old invalid gentleman to whom she read the newspaper four afternoons a week while he slept in the garden. She had got quite used to the frail head on the cotton pillow, the hollowed eyes, the open mouth and the high pinched nose. If he'd been dead she mightn't have noticed for weeks; she wouldn't have minded. But suddenly he knew he was having the paper read to him by an actress! "An actress!" The old head lifted; two points of light quivered in the old eyes. "An actress—are ye?" And Miss Brill smoothed the newspaper as though it were the manuscript of her part and said gently: "Yes, I have been an actress for a long time."

10 The band had been having a rest. Now they started again. And what they played was warm, sunny, yet there was just a faint chill—a something, what was it?—not sadness—no, not sadness—a something that made you want to sing. The tune lifted, lifted, the light shone; and it seemed to Miss Brill that in another moment all of them, all the whole company, would begin singing. The young ones, the laughing ones who were moving together, they would begin, and the men's voices, very resolute and brave, would join them. And then she too, she too, and the others on the benches—they would come in with a kind of accompaniment—something low, that scarcely rose or fell, something so beautiful—moving... And Miss Brill's eyes filled with tears and she looked smiling at all the other members of the company. Yes, we understand, we understand, she thought—though what they understood she didn't know.

11 Just at that moment a boy and girl came and sat down where the old couple had been. They were beautifully dressed; they were in love. The hero and heroine, of course, just arrived from his father's yacht. And still soundlessly singing, still with that trembling smile, Miss Brill prepared to listen.

12 "No, not now," said the girl. "Not here, I can't."

13 "But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?" asked the boy. "Why does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?"

14 "It's her fu-ur which is so funny," giggled the girl. "It's exactly like a fried whiting."¹

15 "Ah, be off with you!" said the boy in an angry whisper. Then: "Tell me, *ma petite chère*—"

16 "No, not here," said the girl. "Not yet."

¹ a fish that is usually eaten either smoked or fried

² French: "my darling"

17 On her way home she usually bought a slice of honey-cake at the baker's. It was her Sunday treat. Sometimes there was an almond in her slice, sometimes not. It made a great difference. If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present—a surprise—something that might very well not have been there. She hurried on the almond Sundays and struck the match for the kettle in quite a dashing way.

18 But to-day she passed the baker's by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room—her room like a cupboard—and sat down on the red eiderdown. She sat there for a long time. The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The capitalized word **Season** in the second paragraph most likely refers to

- A. early autumn.
- B. the arrival of socialites on vacation.
- C. a period of increased social activity.
- D. a change in the weather.
- E. the time during which the band plays.

2. All of the following help to communicate Miss Brill's attitude toward people EXCEPT

- A. ermine.
- B. velvet.
- C. silk.
- D. toque.
- E. cupboards.

3. The most prominent effect created by Mansfield's use of color is

- A. vivid description.
- B. a realistic setting.
- C. contrasting imagery.
- D. character development.
- E. an intimate atmosphere.

4. Based on its use in paragraph five, the word **staggerer** most like refers to a/an

- A. toddler.
- B. latecomer.
- C. automated toy.
- D. intoxicated musician.
- E. unsteady senior.

5. Which of the following best accounts for the overall mood of this story?

- A. narrative intrusion
- B. indirect dialogue
- C. first-person narration
- D. limited omniscience
- E. stream-of-consciousness

Free-Response Question One (text-based):

Carefully read Katherine Mansfield's short story "Miss Brill." Then, write an essay in which you analyze the various ways Mansfield uses language to communicate her view of the title character to the reader.

Before you write your essay:

1. Make sure you understand exactly what you're being asked to write about. A typical Advanced Placement prompt will contain two or three direct verbs, one of which will almost always be to "read" the selection provided.

In this prompt, you are directed to

- read "Miss Brill,"
- write an essay,
- analyze...uses of language.

Be especially aware of the verb that describes the essay you are to write (e.g., *Write an essay in which you analyze...* or *Write an essay that analyzes...*). There is a very important difference between *analyze*, *describe*, *argue*, *evaluate*, and so on. Make certain you do what the prompt tells you to do.

Also be aware of the direct object of that verb (e.g., *analyze the author's choice of words*, *evaluate the effectiveness, argue whether the character can be considered...*, and so on).

Most of the time, even if your test booklet is collected, it will never be used again, so underline any key words or write any margin notes that will help you understand the topic and what exactly you are asked to do with it.

2. Make sure you have something valid to write about. Consider the directives in the prompt and write a single sentence (two at the most) that makes a positive and focused statement about the topic.

For example, the writer of the first essay about "The Gift of the Magi" might have written these preliminary sentences:

The narrator likes Jim and Della, and he approves of the sacrifices they make for each other. He communicates this approval by using overly formal words when simpler ones might be expected, and he uses vivid images and precise shades of meaning to specify exactly what he wants his reader to notice and to feel.

Make sure these sentences address all of the issues and subpoints specified in the prompt.

3. Keeping these sentences in mind, review the selection and find your textual support. Again, the text booklet is probably never going to be used again, so go ahead and underline or bracket the words or phrases that will illustrate and support your points—that will give substance to what you've identified as the main idea of your essay.

Find as much support as you can from throughout the selection. If you end up with more support than you can use in your essay, you can always leave some out. But you don't want to be caught with an essay that is too short and underdeveloped. If you cannot find textual support, or enough textual support, take that as a clue that whatever you're saying in your sentences is simply not going to work and write new sentences.

Consider this: suppose the writer of the "Gift of the Magi" essay thought that the narrator seemed indifferent or apathetic to the characters. He'd have had a very hard time finding much textual support. And if he couldn't find the words and phrases to support his claim, he'd be foolish to continue to try to base his essay on that thesis.

4. Write your essay. Keep referring to the prompt and whatever you underlined or highlighted in the selection to make sure you're on track and addressing everything the prompt wants you to address. ☺

Free-Response Question Two (Independent):

One of the chief goals of the modernist movement of the early twentieth century was to shatter the norms and conventions of previous literary movements. This challenge included developing new techniques for communicating characters' inner lives. Choose a modernist short story and write a carefully reasoned and well-supported essay in which you evaluate the extent to which it achieves the goals of the modernist movement.

Before you write your essay:

1. Make sure you understand exactly what you're being asked to write about. A typical Advanced Placement independent prompt will usually mention some aspect or element of literature or a literary topic about which you presumably have some knowledge.
 - In the "Gift of the Magi" independent prompt, this topic is the power of words and the distinction between words that might have similar meanings but very different uses.
 - In the above "Miss Brill" prompt, the topic is Modernist literature.

It is important that you understand this topic because your essay will receive a fairly low score if you simply ramble on about literature in general or the piece you've chosen.

These prompts will also contain direct verbs to tell you what you are to do with the literature you've chosen.

In this prompt, you are directed to

1. choose a modernist short story,
2. write an essay,
3. evaluate the extent to which it achieves modernist goals.

As with the text-based prompt, be especially aware of the verb that describes the essay you are to write (e.g., *Write an essay in which you analyze... or Write an essay that analyzes...*).

Make certain you do what the prompt tells you to do. In this prompt, you are being directed to *evaluate* to pass judgment on the success of a story to challenge traditional literary norms.

You also need to be aware of the direct object of that verb. Again, in this prompt, you are being asked to evaluate *the extent to which the story you have chosen achieves the goals of the modernist movement* [to challenge literary norms and find ways of exploring the characters' inner lives].

As with the earlier prompt, if this were an actual test and you were not using a textbook, you'd be able to underline any key words or write any margin notes that would help you understand the topic and what exactly you are asked to do with it.

2. Choose an appropriate selection. And there are a few different understandings for "appropriate" in this sense.

First of all, the literature you choose *must* be in the assigned genre. If you are told to choose a short story, you cannot write about a poem. If told to write about a novel, you cannot write about a play. Usually, the instructions will give you some leeway: "choose a novel or play..."

Second, the literature you choose must lend itself to the assigned discussion. If you're told to choose a play with a narrator, then you *must* choose a play (not a novel or poem) that has an actual narrator (e.g., the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*). You would not choose, for example *The Great Gatsby* (narrated by Nick) because *The Great Gatsby* is a novel. Nor would you choose *Hamlet* (a play) because *Hamlet* has no narrator.

Finally, the literature you choose must be worth writing about on an Advanced Placement Exam. Sometimes the prompt will stipulate a work of "literary quality." What this means is open to interpretation and will be discussed later, but you need to think more along the lines of what you would study in a college-level English class than what you may have read in elementary or middle school. This is one reason that your AP and pre-AP courses have had such extensive reading lists—probably even summer reading lists. You want to have read a *lot* of good stories, poems, books, and play so that you will have a large body of work to choose from when faced with this question.

Connotations, ambiguities, and other meanings

Even as you develop a respect for the literal, dictionary definitions of the words used by an author, you must also be aware that just about every word an author might choose to use has, in addition to its denotation, any number of *connotations*—meanings that are commonly accepted by speakers, readers, and writers. The challenge that being aware of possible connotative meanings is that these connotations can change over time and place. Depending on time and place, for example, *to redeem* can mean to save a soul from eternal torment, pay a ransom for a prisoner taken in battle, or turn in a coupon for a fifty-cent discount.

Even after you look up the word in a dictionary, you cannot hope to fully understand the words—or the text they build—without also taking into consideration what the words may have meant at the time and in the place the author wrote them.

This issue of connotation is one of the factors that make different interpretations possible. It is true that a single text may have several possible meanings. It is also possible, however, for a reader's interpretation to be inaccurate or invalid if it is not grounded in what the words really mean—whether denotatively or connotatively.

Another factor that can complicate your effort to understand the text's meaning is the fact that even the denotations of many words can be vague, abstract, open to interpretation. Some words are simply vague. When does the weather pass from cool to cold? (By the same token, at what temperature does something that was warm become hot?)

Some words are ambiguous. They have two or more denotations that might often seem incompatible or contradictory. Consider the simple word *cut*. One can cut a class without cutting it from his or her schedule. If you are not cut, then you have made the cut. A cut on your arm is probably a bad thing, but a cut of meat can be a good thing.

While an author's use of *cut* might be absolutely clear, there might also be subtle implications in the author's choice of a word like *cut* as opposed to a clearer, less ambiguous alternative like *skip* or *miss*, *excise*, or *reduce*. Just as it is important to consider what the word *literally* means according to a reliable dictionary, it is important to consider what *else* the writer may have meant by choosing a particular word.

The following story, Jack London's "To Build a Fire," seems to present no challenges to a reader looking for comprehension, but some of the clearest words have multiple meanings and a variety of connotations that create several levels of tone, mood, and meaning. The text has been annotated to point out to you how a full understanding of the words' meanings will contribute to a reader's understanding of the text as a whole.

3. Make sure you have something to say about both the topic and your selected literature. Jot down what you remember about the literature you've chosen. List key plot events, but also think in terms of plot structure: rising action, climax, falling action, and so on. List characters, but also think in terms of function or role—protagonist or antagonist—and in terms of type—hero, anti-hero, foil, clown, etc. Always remember what the prompt is directing you to write about, and make sure you jot down notes that pertain to the assigned topic.

Jot down quotations or at least close paraphrases. If you cannot remember this level of detail in the literature you've chosen, choose another piece of literature.

Also jot down everything you know and remember about the assigned topic. What does the prompt mean by "the characters' inner lives"? What would constitute the "norms and conventions of previous literary movements"? These are the specific points you are going to need to address in your essay.

4. Make sure you are clear about what you are going to say.

As you did for your text-based essay, consider the directives in the prompt and write a single sentence (two at the most) that makes a positive and focused statement about the assigned topic.

The writer of the second essay about "The Gift of the Magi" might have written something like this:

In "The Gift of the Magi," O. Henry uses strict dictionary definitions of words and lets different meanings play against each other in order to create a lighthearted tone and make a story that could be depressing almost humorous.

Make sure these sentences address all of the issues and subpoints specified in the prompt.

5. Write your essay. Keep referring to the prompt and your notes to make sure you're on track and addressing everything the prompt wants you to address. ☺