Writing the Free-Response

Comparison/Contrast Poetry Essay

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Students often find the poetry essay the most challenging of the three free-response essays on the AP English Literature and Composition Exam. For some unknown reason, seniors appear to fear analyzing poetry and writing about it. Despite our efforts to prepare students for conveying their understanding of poetry in an essay, James Barcus, Chief Reader of the Exam, suggests in his commentary on the Poetry Essay for the 2007 exam, “Rather than becoming more adept at reading complex texts, they [students] seem to be reducing poetic texts to the ‘sound bites’ with which they have become more and more familiar as TV and other technical devices have become ubiquitous.” When the task of analyzing poetry is coupled with comparing and contrasting two poems, the essays are often the weakest of the three. Too often students are afraid to write about poetry because they fear that they will be wrong. This fear of not knowing the precise tone or meaning of a poem paralyzes some students.

**Comparison/Contrast**

Most students entering the AP English Literature and Composition class are familiar with writing comparison/contrast essays. Students recognize that when called upon to write such an essay, they need to point out similarities and differences of the two topics or pieces of literature. While most remember the two basic comparison/contrast formats, it is usually a good idea to review the block and point-by-point organizational pattern. Readers of comparison/contrast essays often feel that they are reading two separate essays—one on each poem. Therefore, it is a good idea to remind students to make references to Poem A when they discuss Poem B if they choose to use the block method. Making connections between two poems seems inherent in the point-by point method. In response to students’ questions about which method Readers prefer most, I assure them that we have no preference but that we are looking for some form of organization, as that is a discriminating factor for essays in the upper and lower halves of the scoring guide. Students should choose the format that works best for them.

Teachers might want to review with students what is expected in the event that only one word (compare or contrast) is used in the prompt. I still remember the discussion around the tables at the AP Reading in 2000 when only *compare* was used in the prompt on the Sirens. Most of us agreed that students who pointed out similarities as well as differences in the portrayals of the Sirens had stronger essays. Students should know that both compare and contrast are meant whether or not just one descriptor appears. In 1994, the prompt asked students to *contrast* the speakers’ views of Helen.]