



Writing the Free-Response Comparison/Contrast Poetry Essay

Danny Lawrence

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. The Poetry Presentation activity described below provides students with skills in analyzing poems on their own. 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. That’s why I like the strategies that accompany this activity; they encourage students to find multiple meanings of a poem. My goal in this activity is to help students to gain confidence in their abilities to find supportable meanings of poems and to allow students to share their discoveries about a poem with a group and then with the whole class.

Preliminary Work

As John Donne suggests “no man is an island entire of itself,” I suppose no activity in the classroom exists totally alone either. Before I describe the Poetry Presentation unit and the activities accompanying it, I would like to place it in the context of the

academic year. Since the Poetry Presentation occurs early in the second semester, students are already familiar with most of the activities that compose it.

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.

I assign the comparison/contrast essay for out-of-class writing assignments during the first semester to insure that the form is clearly in most students' frame of reference before we practice the in-class essays that utilize compare and contrast. On out-of-class assignments, I can see organizational problems while reviewing rough drafts. I begin the year with a study of the short story. Near the end of that unit, we read at least three short stories by Flannery O'Connor and three by James Joyce. Students are then assigned to write a comparison/contrast essay on O'Connor and Joyce. Another writing assignment asks students to compare and contrast a scene from a film version of written text. Students will determine which media is most effective in conveying meaning or tone by analyzing the cinematic techniques in the film and comparing and contrasting those with the literary techniques of the corresponding prose passage. (I use either *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* or the film version of *The Dead* and Joyce's short story for this assignment.)

Just before I begin the poetry presentation, I will spend approximately 15 minutes of a class period reviewing the comparison/contrast formats using the poems "The Bat-Poet" by Randall Jarrell and "Bat" by D. H. Lawrence. Both poems are accessible to students and provide easy reference to review the block and the point-by-point organizational format.

[Additional note: 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.]

TP-CASTT

Because of vertical teaming, many students in my classes are familiar with TP-CASTT (see Appendix A) as a way of analyzing poems. Therefore, I do not find it necessary to teach the strategy. I do not review in class what students have written in the TP-CASTT grid either. I want them to see the strategy as a way of discovering what a poem means on their own. When we discuss the grid in class, we tend to validate some responses over others—and I prefer not to do that. This technique is helpful in that it asks students to discover what they see in a poem—and not what the teacher or the better students see as important or the theme. I use TP-CASTT two times during first semester. I give students a copy of the TP-CASTT grid and a poem from an old AP English Literature and Composition essay (without the prompt). When students come to class after having applied TP-CASTT to the poem, I give them a copy of the prompt, and ask them to write the essay in class without any discussion. At another time I ask students to use TP-CASTT on a poem from a released multiple-choice exam. Rather than discussing what students filled in on the grid the day it is due, I give the multiple-choice test. Students who complete the grid do much better on the in-class essay and on the practice multiple-choice test than those who did not. My goal in using TP-CASTT is to provide a means for students to unlock poems on their own. The *English Vertical Team Guidebook*, a College Board publication, discusses TP-CASTT fully on pages 94–100.

Rhetorical Triangle

Another technique when initiating a discussion of a poem is the rhetorical triangle (see Appendix B). I first used the rhetorical triangle in the English Language class but discovered it is a good tool for students to use when thinking about the big picture of a poem. The rhetorical triangle asks students to think about the *speaker*, the *audience*, and the *message*. I use the rhetorical triangle as a way to “brainstorm” a

poem. Encouraging students to consider possibilities of who the speaker or intended audience might be gets students away from trying to find the one right answer and from focusing on those smaller details that often lead them down that path of no return. I begin the discussion by asking students who they think the speaker is and then ask for the reason why they think so. The most common answer is “the author.” Rather than hearing the explanation for the hundredth time that the author is not necessarily the speaker, I ask them to tell me what in the poem proves that the speaker is the author. Then we speculate on who we think the speaker wanted to hear this poem. Once we discuss those possibilities we discuss what message the author wanted that audience to hear. Once students feel comfortable sharing these initial observations, the discussion is more open, and then we can look at the finer points of the poem—the imagery, the diction, figurative language, etc. and see how those support (or not) our conclusions about speaker, audience, and message. This exercise works well as a class starter. I especially like to use this activity with simple poems like John Updike’s “Youth’s Progress” and “Ex-Basketball Player.”

Vendler’s *Poems* * *Poets* * *Poetry*

Another resource that models for students how to explore a poem on their own is Helen Vendler’s *Poems · Poets · Poetry*, Chapter 4: “Describing Poems.” In this chapter, Vendler provides 13 different questions that students might ask when they are exploring a poem. Beyond asking students to think about tone, meaning, and the climax of the poem, Vendler asks students to plot the emotional skeleton of a poem, to speculate on what might have happened before the poem opened that caused the poet to compose the poem, to categorize or classify the poem if the poem were spoken at a public gathering, and many other thought-provoking inquiries into the poem. Answering these 13 questions is a productive group activity for students. I found that these questions were more challenging for the advanced students—and especially for the students who wanted more than what TP-CASTT asked of them. I assign students to read Chapter 4 of the Vendler text and quiz them on her terminology—for example, what does she mean by the terms antecedent scenario, agency, speech acts, and emotional curve. I then divide the class into groups and give them a poem from a previous AP English Literature and Composition Exam (without the prompt) to describe using Vendler’s questions. After spending a period with the poem and the questions, students write the essay the following day on the poem they discovered together. Again, I like this activity because it encourages students to explore a poem on their own and with their classmates. I try very hard in my class not to *teach* poetry,

but to provide students with the tools to uncover it on their own. (See Appendix C for an example of a group's description of "It's a Woman's World" by Eavan Boland using Vendler's 13 questions. "It's a Woman's World" was the prompt for the poetry essay on the 1998 exam.)

Choral Reading

Although some students are intimidated the first time they participate in a choral reading, the majority of them enjoy the creativity and the performance associated with a choral reading. They change the volume and inflection of their voices to indicate shifts in tone or speakers. They often incorporate facial expressions and even body movements—especially hand gestures. Students face the front of the room while others face the back—and then they turn or some will stand while others sit. Some students might read only one word or a group of words while the rest of the group reads the poem in unison. Sometimes a different student might repeat lines that are considered important—creating an echo effect. There are too many possibilities to list them all. I tell students what a choral reading is and give a few suggestions or examples, but they often discover ways of presenting the poem aloud that I would never have thought of. Choral readings are often what students remember most about a poem. A good choral reading of a poem demonstrates incredible insight into the meaning of a poem.

Poetry Presentations

I plan the Poetry Presentation assignment during late January or early February. The weather is usually cold, and students are reading *Crime and Punishment* outside of class in installments. On the nights when students are reading a section of the novel, the Poetry Presentation activities would fill the classes during the day.

I divide the class into six groups of five or six students per group. I choose the students in the groups for this activity as I want stronger, more confident students working with those who are less strong or are intimidated by poetry. My classes are approximately 30 students, so six groups of five students work well.

While each day highlights the activities for that day, it is important to remember that not all the work for this unit can be completed during class time. Some reading and work must be done outside of class.

Day 1

Today students receive the handout of poems and the activity schedule for the four days of the activity (see Appendix D). I chose the 2001, 2004, and 2007 prompts; feel free to choose others from the list in Appendix E or choose poems that you would like to pair for comparison and contrast, and write your own prompt. Do *not* include the prompts and do *not* put the paired poems side by side on the handout. I make no reference during the activities that students will write a comparison/contrast essay after the presentations.

Students meet their group members, exchange e-mail addresses or contact numbers, and decide which three students will complete the Vendler grid and which three students will complete the TP-CASTT grid. Because students have practice analyzing poetry using the TP-CASTT and Vendler grids during first semester, little or no explanation of the two are necessary at this time. The stronger students in the group usually opt for the Vendler grid, while the less confident ones choose TP-CASTT. Remind students that these grids are for homework. Students spend the remainder of this first class period reading the poem aloud—each student within a group must read it aloud sometime during the period. The group also completes one rhetorical triangle grid—making certain that they have listed a number of possibilities for *speaker*, *audience*, and *message*. I encourage students to include many possibilities and not focus on a single “right” answer. At the end of the period I ask each group to turn in one rhetorical triangle for assessment. I do *not* give students the Scoring Guide (See Appendix F), but they understand from the assignment handout that each day is worth 20 points for a total of 100 points for the unit. Groups are given three blank grids of TP-CASTT and three blank grids for the Vendler questions.

Day 2

The second day of this activity does not immediately follow Day 1. Students have at least two nights (or more depending on the schedule) to study their poems and complete the assignment they chose (TP-CASTT or Vendler). On Day 2, I circulate throughout the room listening to the groups discuss the poem based on the observations of group members from the homework assignment. When I am asked questions about the poems I try not to give an answer, but ask the group questions that might lead them to some conclusion. At the end of the period I collect the Vendler and TP-CASTT grids and the level of completion contributes to the group’s score for that day.

Day 3

The third day may follow immediately after Day 2, but it rarely does in my class. On Day 3, students spend the period preparing the presentation of their poem for the whole class. Students are reminded of the requirements for the presentation: a choral reading of the poem, something visual, and a discussion of the poem. Group members decide who will speak for the group during the presentation and who will draw, paint, or create something visual. All students must participate in the choral reading, but not all must participate in the presentation.

Day 4 (and 5 and 6)

Day 4—the presentations—follow closely after Day 3. The number of presentations that can be delivered in one class period will depend upon the length of the period, but we usually have two presentations in one class period (our classes are 55 minutes). Students are given 15 minutes for the presentation, but it usually takes longer—closer to 25 minutes. I do think it is important that you tell students they only have 15 minutes—and then allow them 25. Students are encouraged to pay close attention to the presentations from the other groups. They have copies of the poems in front of them, and I encourage them to take notes. I tell them that on the day after we finish the presentations there will be some form of assessment. They naturally think there will be an objective test—and I don't tell them they are incorrect in their assumption.

During the presentations, students usually give comments on literary devices that the poet uses to convey a variety of meanings and/or interpretations. I discourage students from giving a single meaning or theme for a poem and encourage them to find multiple meanings/themes. Most groups ask for a transparency of the poem, which I provide, so they can make references to specific parts of the poem during the presentation. Because students sometimes come to the AP English Literature and Composition class too dependent upon connecting the poet's life and times with the meaning of the poem, I also discourage students from giving *any* information about the poet's life and times.

Please note on the Scoring Guide (see Appendix F) that students may score 20 points for the presentation. Those 20 points come from the task at hand—the choral reading, the visual, and the presentation. They may also receive 20 points in the “In-class Essay” heading—those 20 points are based on the “quality” of the discussion of the poem—how insightful the comments are concerning the poem.

Last Day In-Class Essay

I must decide prior to the final day of the assignment which two poems each group will write about. Students will *not* write the essay on the poem they presented to the class. The following is one plan for the in-class essay:

- ✓ 2001 Essay Prompt—Groups 2 and 4
- ✓ 2004 Essay Prompt—Groups 1 and 5
- ✓ 2007 Essay Prompt—Groups 3 and 6

Students have 40 minutes to write the essay, and I score the essays holistically.

Assessment

For this activity students receive two grades. The first grade is for the Poetry Presentation activity (see Appendix F for the scoring rubric). Each person in the group receives the same score. The second grade is an individual grade for the in-class essay. The in-class essays are scored holistically using the scoring guide for that essay. (The scoring guides, sample essays, and commentary to the questions for these three years may be found at http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/exam/exam_questions/2002.html.)

Conclusion

This activity allows students to hear six poems taught, to study one in depth, and to write on two others. But the most important part of this activity is that students are doing the thinking and the discovering themselves. I try very hard from the beginning of the year not to allow students to become dependent upon me for the answers to what literature means. Instead, I see my role as providing the students with the tools necessary for unlocking poems on their own, and this activity does that well. Obviously, such an activity as the Poetry Presentations can be used with other poems and with other outcomes. I find that this approach to the comparison/contrast essay works because the poems are shorter, it allows students exposure to more poems, and it provides practice for the comparison/contrast essay.