

PASSAGE ANALYSIS TIPS

(Some ideas based on comments by Alan Buster, AP English Consultant)

Passage analysis questions on the AP exam often suggest which stylistic terms the writer should address. Even when the questions mention no stylistic terms, it is wise to include references to **diction, syntax, figures of speech, and tone**. Students should pay particular attention to the main verbs in the question: verbs like “characterize” and “analyze” call for the writer to emphasize style with appropriate terms.

When analyzing **diction**, consider such questions as:

Is the language **concrete** or **abstract**, **verbs active** or **passive**?

Are the words **monosyllabic** or **polysyllabic**?

Do the words have interesting or unusual **connotations**?

Is the diction **formal, colloquial, slang, didactic, etc**?

Is there any **change in the level** of diction in the passage?

What can the reader **infer** about the speaker or the speaker’s attitude from the word choice, and how does it connect to **tone**?

When analyzing **syntax**, consider such questions as:

Are the sentences **simple** and direct, or **complex** and convoluted?

How do **dependent clauses** relate to **main clauses**?

Does the author use **repetition** or **parallel structure** for emphasis?

Does the author write **periodic** or **cumulative** sentences?

Are there instances of **balanced sentences, chiasmus, or antithesis**?

Are there **rhetorical questions** in the passage?

How is the passage **punctuated**, and what is the effect of punctuation?

When discussing **figures of speech**, consider such questions as:

Are there interesting **images** or **patterns of imagery** (word pictures) in the passage?

Does the author create **analogies**, like **similes** and **metaphors**, or broader comparisons?

Does the author make use of **personification, synecdoche, or apostrophe**?

Is there deliberate **hyperbole** or **understatement** in the passage?

Does the author employ **paradox** or **oxymoron** to add complexity?

What part do rhythm and sound devices like **assonance, consonance, alliteration, or onomatopoeia** play in the passage?

When discussing **tone**, consider such questions as:

What seems to be the **speaker’s attitude** in the passage?

Can you hear a distinct **voice**?

Is **more than one attitude** or point of view expressed?

Does the passage have a noticeable emotional **mood** or **atmosphere**?

Can anything in the passage be described as **irony**?

****NOTE:**

Never substitute terminology for analysis.

Always connect the literary term (and example) directly to the **effect** it creates in the passage.

Include clear **commentary** after all supporting quotations and tie to the **total meaning**.