How to Write a Passage Analysis of Prose

Definition of Analysis: "A method by which a thing is separated into parts, and those parts are given rigorous, logical, detailed scrutiny, resulting in a consistent and relatively complete account of the elements of the thing and the principles of their organization." (from *A Handbook to Literature*, 5th edition. By C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon. New York, Macmillan Publishing Co, 1986, p. 20)

A QUICK GUIDE FOR PASSAGE ANALYSIS IN A.P. ENGLISH

Passage analysis questions on the A.P 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; verbs like "**evaluate**" or "**defend, challenge** or **qualify**" call upon the writer to consider broader issues of argument and logic. ("**Qualify**" means to identify and defend which aspects of the passage are valid and which are not.) Even in these broader discussions students are advised to use appropriate stylistic terms when possible.

SAMPLE LITERARY ANALYSIS PROMPTS FROM RECENT AP EXAMS
- From "a nineteenth-century novel": Discuss how the narrator's <u>style</u> reveals his attitudes toward the people he describes.
- Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*: Analyze how Trumbo uses such techniques as <u>point of view</u>, selection of <u>detail</u>, and <u>syntax</u> to characterize the relationship between the young man and his father.

DICTION: The distinctive word choice of a particular author.
When analyzing **diction**, consider such questions as:
- Is the language **concrete** or **abstract**?
- Are the words **monosyllabic** or **polysyllabic**?
- Do the words have interesting **connotations**?
- Is the diction **formal** or **colloquial**?
- 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? (see tone below)

SYNTAX: An author's distinctive form of sentence construction. Distinctive forms include: very long sentences; very short sentences; parallelism (e.g. "on the sea, in the air, etc.); and repetition of key words or phrases.
When analyzing **syntax**, consider such questions as:
- Are the sentences **simple** and direct, or **complex** and convoluted?
- Does the author use **repetition** or **parallel structure** for emphasis?
- Does the author write **periodic** or **cumulative** sentences?
- Are there instances of **balanced sentences** or **antithesis**?
- Are there **rhetorical questions** in the passage?

FIGURES OF SPEECH: any language that is not meant to be taken literally: analogies and exaggerations
When discussing **figures of speech**, consider such questions as:
- Are there interesting **images** or **patterns of imagery** in the passage?
- Does the author create **analogies**, like **similes** and **metaphors** or broader descriptive comparisons?
- Does the author make use of **personification** 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** or **onomatopoeia** play in the passage?

TONE: : The writer's attitude or moral outlook toward the subject, e.g.: as angry, cynical, empathetic, critical, idealistic, ironic, optimistic
When discussing **tone**, consider such questions as:
- What seems to be the speaker's **attitude** in the passage?
- 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**?

NEVER substitute terminology for analysis. **ALWAYS** connect the literary term (and example) directly to the effect it creates in the passage.