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 style reveals his attitudes toward the people he describes.
- Dalton Trumbo’s Johnny Got His Gun: Analyze how Trumbo uses such techniques as point of view, selection of detail, and syntax 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 there 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.