

I. The Essay

What is the significance of one specific element of *Hamlet*, and how does this element of the play contribute to play's form and help illuminate meaning within the play?

- Choose one specific element of the play and analyze how this element—in all its complexities and nuances—is essential to the play and how it contributes to the play's aesthetic impact, complexity of meanings, and total effect. For example, you might focus on an Open Question from the list provided; a motif (such as a key term, idea, or image) that recurs, echoes, and develops throughout the play; a significant scene whose shifts and complexity embody the play's issues in miniature; a key character; a set of parallels in character or sub-plot, etc.
- Communicate your ideas in an essay of at least 1,800 words that illustrates your ideas with specific references to the text and careful analysis.
- A Useful Tool: The Folger Library's online version of *Hamlet* (which I have linked on our MySchool page) includes a searchable text that enables you to search the play for key words or phrases. Use the "Search This Text" tool on the right of the page to **trace the appearance and development of a word, image, idea, or other motif throughout the play.**
- For this essay, you may want to take an **inductive** approach, rather than a **deductive** approach. (After the essay topics listed below, I have described how inductive writing works and how it compares to deductive writing.) Keeping the above concepts in mind, I don't want you to write an essay about "the meaning" of *Hamlet*, because I see little value in a reductive essay that oversimplifies the play's depth, complexity, and mystery. Nor do I want a glib, one-sided, and superficial discussion of a topic that merits a deeper, more critical examination. Instead, I want you to choose a topic of inquiry into the play, and in each body paragraph of your essay, I want you to (1) examine specific evidence relevant to your topic and (2) closely study the evidence to determine what we can infer or learn from it.

II. Possible Essay Topics

1. Trace a word, image, or motif through the play and connect its significance to the play as a whole.

Here are some ideas:

- a. Critic A.R. Braunmuller writes that in *Hamlet* we find "profound investigations into the nature of knowledge and knowing." The play begins with a question: "Who's there?" (1.1.1). Examined closely, the play contains an extraordinary number of **questions** and is permeated with characters' desire to find out truth in the face of mystery and ambiguity. Look at all the **interrogatories** in the play—all the lines that begin with "who, what when, where, why, how" and/or end in question marks. Trace this trope through the play and discuss its significance to the play as a whole.
- b. **Language, Words, Speaking, and Silence** – When Polonius asks Hamlet what he is reading, Hamlet says, "words, words, words," and later Hamlet says that he "must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words" (2.2.543). In what ways does the play examine the power (or failure) of language? Trace "word" through the play and look at issues of language—all the way to Hamlet's final request of Horatio and his final words. What does this motif contribute to the play as a whole?
- c. The Biblical image of **a fallen Eden or a lost paradise** is threaded throughout the play. Trace this image through the play and connect it to the play's larger concerns.
- d. In Act 2, scene 2, line 236, Hamlet says that "Denmark is a prison." Trace the images of **prisons, traps, and confinement** through the play.
- e. Critic Harold Bloom writes that "*Hamlet* is a play about **theatricality**, and not about revenge." Hamlet himself declares, "I know not 'seems'" in his first scene in the play (1.2.76). **Look at the role of "seeming" versus "being" in the play.** How many situations can you find in which "acting," "performing," and even "directing" occur in the play? In contrast, are there any times in which people are simply "being" (rather than acting, performing, and directing)? What is revealed by the multiple ways in which this motif is repeated in the play?
- f. **Much violence is done to ears in this play.** Trace this trope through the play and discuss its significance to the play as a whole.
- g. In the graveyard scene Hamlet says in amazement, "To what base **uses** we may return, Horatio!" (5.1.202). How does the play examine different ways in which people are "**used**," and which of those "uses" are particularly "base"? Does anyone avoid being "used"?

h. Listed below are some other themes, concepts, and motifs that are equally provocative and interesting. Check with me first if you want to develop an idea of your own.

- Appearance vs. Reality (what seems vs. what is)
- The Arras
- Consciousness, Thought, and the Journey of the Inner Self
- Death (and how it affects our conception of life)
- Deception and Manipulation
- Dishonesty, Betrayal, Treachery, and Being “False”
- Honesty, Faithfulness, Loyalty, and Being “True”
- *Hubris* (or improper pride) versus Humility
- Hypocrisy
- Irony and Indirections
- Isolation, Alienation, and Solitude
- Parent-Child Relationships
- Parallel Plots and Foil Characters
- Passion, Impulse, and Action (versus Thought, Intellect, and Contemplation)
- Poison, Disease, and the Stink of Corruption
- Revenge
- Secrets, Mysteries, and Enigmas
- Social Rank, Status, and Relationships
- Spies and Spying
- Traps, Snares, and Means of “Catching” Someone or Something
- Truth: Inquiries, Doubts, and the Desire for Certainty
- Wit, Cleverness, and Jokes

2. Choose any of the Open Question topics from the list provided at the end of this document (see pg.5-7), and discuss how this topic applies to *Hamlet*.
3. Look at the issue of **belief, trust, and credulity** versus **doubt, suspicion, and questioning**. In what different ways is this dichotomy present within *Hamlet*, and how do the multiple examples of it influence our understanding of the play?
4. What is **the significance of any specific character** in the story—even a minor character? What is the character’s literal involvement in the events of the play? Moreover, in what ways might this character function as a foil for other characters involved in the play? What aspects of the story does this character’s presence highlight or emphasize for us?
5. Look at the issue of **fathers and sons**. In *Hamlet* we find three almost parallel sets of fathers and sons—King Hamlet and Hamlet, Polonius and Laertes, and Old King Fortinbras and young Fortinbras. Each son has had a father killed. Compare and contrast the three pairs. Why does Shakespeare create these three parallel sets for *Hamlet*? Look at the play as a whole. Look closely at individual lines. How do these three parallels contribute to the larger impact and effects of the play?
6. **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern** are relatively minor characters in the play; nevertheless, Tom Stoppard chose them as the main characters in his absurdist play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, in which *Hamlet* is rewritten from their point of view. Examine these two characters, including their roles in the play, their important personal traits, and the ways in which their presence parallels other key elements of the play. In what ways are these men foils for other characters in the play? In what ways are they ambiguous?
7. Claudius says of Hamlet, “**Madness** in great ones must not unwatched go (3.1.5) and Polonius says of Hamlet, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (2.2.201). Much is made of Hamlet’s mental state in the play, but the issue clearly applies to other characters besides Hamlet. Not only does Ophelia descend into “madness,” but one could argue that even Laertes has moments when he is deprived of his “reason” or better judgment. In contrast, Hamlet praises Horatio as a man who “is not passion’s slave” and whom he describes as “A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards / Hast ta’en with equal thanks” and “Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled / That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger / To sound what stop she please” (3.2.66-71). **What is the importance of “madness” in the play?** What exactly do we mean by the term “madness”? Can we tell when

Hamlet is “mad,” versus when he is simply putting an “antic disposition on” (as he suggests 1.5.171)? Is there a point at which Hamlet’s play-acting becomes truth? Perhaps even more importantly, to whom else in the play can this term be applied, and what meaningful parallels do such comparisons reveal?

8. How does **the motif of friendship, loyalty, and love** play an important role in the play? Consider that one way of understanding *Hamlet* is as a study of human relationships—both the connections between human beings and the ways in which humans treat one another. Is there genuine friendship, loyalty, or even love in any relationships in the play? Why does this issue matter to the larger concerns of the play?
9. Examine the character of **Ophelia**. What is her “role” in the play? What is her relationship with her father and her brother? What is her relationship with Hamlet? With Gertrude? In what ways is she also a foil for other characters? Use very specific lines and examples from the play to support your points. (An interesting look into Ophelia’s character and the development of that character is revealed through her songs and the flowers she distributes in her madness. You might also want to examine this scene for double meanings. Look at the language of the flowers. What does rosemary stand for? Pansies? etc.)
10. When **Polonius** asks Claudius, “What do you think of me?” Claudius replies that he thinks of Polonius “As of a man faithful and honorable” (2.2.130-131). **How does Shakespeare want us to view Polonius?** Notice not just what Polonius says and does as advisor to the King, but also what he says and does as father to Laertes and Ophelia. Notice also what Hamlet says to and about Polonius. Furthermore, when we first hear Polonius’ monologue to Laertes (1.3.65-86), we don’t know much about Polonius yet. In light of everything that we eventually find out about Polonius, how can we see his speech to Laertes with new eyes and understand Polonius’ advice in a different way than we might at first have been inclined to understand it? What specific values does Polonius actually seem to be advocating in this speech, and how might these values help us explain Polonius’ character and his choices? Connect Polonius’s character—and the more subtly important aspects of it that Shakespeare wants us to notice—to the play as a whole.
11. In Act 1, scene 4, line 66, Hamlet says, “I do not set my life at a pin’s fee.” Later, in Act 2, scene 2, lines 209-211, he says to Polonius, “You cannot take from me anything I am not more willing to part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life.” **What is Hamlet’s attitude toward death and toward life, and how does his attitude evolve throughout the play?** Why? Again, don’t settle for what is obvious and easy. Look closely at all his speeches about death (and life), including his words to Horatio in the graveyard scene (5.1) and the scene before the fencing match (5.2), as well as his more famous speeches—“To be, or not to be” and “O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt.” Why does he feel the way he feels? Does Hamlet end up learning or realizing anything significant about death—or about life?
12. Look closely at **any important scene or passage**. Give a close reading of it and connect it to the play as a whole. How is this small section of the play connected to multiple other scenes, characters, and issues?

Here are some possible choices:

- a. Act 2, scene 2, lines 222-311
 - b. Act 2, scene 2, lines 505-566 (from the “Hecuba” speech to Hamlet’s 2nd soliloquy)
 - c. Act 3, scene 1, lines 56-90 (“To be, or not to be”)
 - d. Act 3, scene 2, lines 38-104 (Hamlet sets up “*The Mousetrap*”)
 - e. Act 3, scene 4, lines 54-203 (Hamlet’s “interview” with his mother)
 - f. Act 4, scene 4, lines 33-67 (Hamlet’s soliloquy on the way to England)
 - g. Act 5, scene 1, lines 65-216 (Hamlet’s contemplation of death while watching and interacting with the gravedigger)
13. Discuss **Hamlet’s character**. Who is Hamlet? Is he a fundamentally ambiguous character, or can we understand him with some clarity? Is he the “sweet prince” (5.2.361), too sensitive and good for a world as “rank” as Denmark has become? Is he more “like a soldier” who has behaved most valiantly and honorably in his struggle against evil and who would “have proved most royal” (5.2.398, 400), had he lived to be King? Or, as Harold Bloom points out, “We have to be bewildered by a dramatic character who changes every time he speaks and yet maintains a consistent enough identity so that he cannot be mistaken for anyone else in Shakespeare.” Again, this is an easy topic with which to be glib. Look closely and critically at this topic and go beyond the obvious. Support your perspective with close and careful references to the text.

14. **Hamlet's soliloquies** continually let the audience know what is happening in Hamlet's mind—which is particularly important in a play in which so many characters want to know what the protagonist is thinking. Discuss the importance of Hamlet's soliloquies and how they chronicle Hamlet's inner life and the expansion of his consciousness. How do Hamlet's soliloquies reveal his fundamental struggles and the constant progression of his character?

IV. Open Questions from the AP Test That Can Be Applied to *Hamlet*

1977. In some novels and plays, certain parallel or recurring events prove to be significant. In an essay, describe the major similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in a novel or play and discuss the significance of such events. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1979. Choose a complex and important character in a novel or a play of recognized literary merit who might, on the basis of the character's actions alone, be considered evil or immoral. In a well-organized essay, explain both how and why the full presentation of the character in the work makes us react more sympathetically than we otherwise might. Avoid plot summary.

1981. The meaning of some literary works is often enhanced by sustained allusion to myths, the Bible, or other works of literature. Select a literary work that makes use of such a sustained reference. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain the allusion that predominates in the work and analyze how it enhances the work's meaning.

1982. In great literature, no scene of violence exists for its own sake. Choose a work of literary merit that confronts the reader or audience with a scene or scenes of violence. In a well-organized essay, explain how the scene or scenes contribute to the meaning of the complete work. Avoid plot summary.

1983. From a novel or play of literary merit, select an important character who is a villain. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the nature of the character's villainy and show how it enhances meaning in the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1985. A critic has said that one important measure of a superior work of literature is its ability to produce in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude. Select a literary work that produces this "healthy confusion." Write an essay in which you explain the sources of the "pleasure and disquietude" experienced by the readers of the work.

1988. Choose a distinguished novel or play in which some of the most significant events are mental or psychological; for example, awakenings, discoveries, changes in consciousness. In a well-organized essay, describe how the author manages to give these internal events the sense of excitement, suspense, and climax usually associated with external action. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1990. Choose a novel or play that depicts a conflict between a parent (or a parental figure) and a son or daughter. Write an essay in which you analyze the sources of the conflict and explain how the conflict contributes to the meaning of the work. Avoid plot summary.

1992. In a novel or play, a confidant (male) or a confidante (female) is a character, often a friend or relative of the hero or heroine, whose role is to be present when the hero or heroine needs a sympathetic listener to confide in. Frequently the result is, as Henry James remarked, that the confidant or confidante can be as much "the reader's friend as the protagonist's." However, the author sometimes uses this character for other purposes as well. Choose a confidant or confidante from a novel or play of recognized literary merit and write an essay in which you discuss the various ways this character functions in the work. You may write your essay on one of the following novels or plays or on another of comparable quality. Do not write on a poem or short story.

1993. "The true test of comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter." Choose a novel, play, or long poem in which a scene or character awakens "thoughtful laughter" in the reader. Write an essay in which you show why this laughter is "thoughtful" and how it contributes to the meaning of the work.

1994. In some works of literature, a character who appears briefly, or does not appear at all, is a significant presence. Choose a novel or play of literary merit and write an essay in which you show how such a character functions in the work. You may wish to discuss how the character affects action, theme, or the development of other characters. Avoid plot summary.

1995. Writers often highlight the values of a culture or a society by using characters who are alienated from that culture or society because of gender, race, class, or creed. Choose a novel or a play in which such a character plays a significant role and show how that character's alienation reveals the surrounding society's assumptions or moral values.

1998. In his essay "Walking," Henry David Thoreau offers the following assessment of literature:

"In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tameness. It is the uncivilized free and wild thinking in *Hamlet* and *The Iliad*, in all scriptures and mythologies, not learned in schools, that delights us."

From the works that you have studied in school, choose a novel, play, or epic poem that you may initially have thought was conventional and tame but that you now value for its "uncivilized free and wild thinking." Write an essay in which you explain what constitutes its "uncivilized free and wild thinking" and how that thinking is central to the value of the work as a whole. Support your ideas with specific references to the work you choose.

1999. The eighteenth-century British novelist Laurence Sterne wrote, "No body, but he who has felt it, can conceive what a plaguing thing it is to have a man's mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time."

From a novel or play choose a character (not necessarily the protagonist) whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify each of the two conflicting forces and explain how this conflict with one character illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.

2001. One definition of madness is "mental delusion or the eccentric behavior arising from it." But Emily Dickinson wrote:

Much madness is divinest Sense-
To a discerning Eye-

Novelists and playwrights have often seen madness with a "discerning Eye." Select a novel or play in which a character's apparent madness or irrational behavior plays an important role. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain what this delusion or eccentric behavior consists of and how it might be judged reasonable. Explain the significance of the "madness" to the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2002. Morally ambiguous characters—characters whose behavior discourages readers from identifying them as purely evil or purely good—are at the heart of many works of literature. Choose a novel or play in which a morally ambiguous character plays a pivotal role. Then write an essay in which you explain how the character can be viewed as morally ambiguous and why his or her moral ambiguity is significant to the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2003. According to critic Northrop Frye, "Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divisive lightning." Select a novel or play in which a tragic figure functions as an instrument of the suffering of others. Then write an essay in which you explain how the suffering brought upon others by that figure contributes to the tragic vision of the work as a whole.

2004. Critic Roland Barthes has said, "Literature is the question minus the answer." Choose a novel, or play, and, considering Barthes' observation, write an essay in which you analyze a central question the work raises and the extent to which it offers answers. Explain how the author's treatment of this question affects your understanding of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2004, Form B. The most important themes in literature are sometimes developed in scenes in which a death or deaths take place. Choose a novel or play and write a well-organized essay in which you show how a specific death scene helps to illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2007, Form B. Works of literature often depict acts of betrayal. Friends and even family may betray a protagonist; main characters may likewise be guilty of treachery or may betray their own values. Select a novel or play that includes such acts of betrayal. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the nature of the betrayal and show how it contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

2008. In a literary work, a minor character, often known as a foil, possesses traits that emphasize, by contrast or comparison, the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the main character. For example, the ideas or behavior of a minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character. Choose a novel or play in

which a minor character serves as a foil for the main character. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the relation between the minor character and the major character illuminates the meaning of the work.

2009. A symbol is an object, action, or event that represents something or that creates a range of associations beyond itself. In literary works a symbol can express an idea, clarify meaning, or enlarge literal meaning. Select a novel or play and, focusing on one symbol, write an essay analyzing how that symbol functions in the work and what it reveals about the characters or themes of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2011. In a novel by William Styron, a father tells his son that life “is a search for justice.” Choose a character from a novel or play who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the character’s understanding of justice, the degree to which the character’s search for justice is successful, and the significance of this search for the work as a whole.

2012. “And, after all, our surroundings influence our lives and characters as much as fate, destiny or any supernatural agency.” Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces*
Choose a novel or play in which cultural, physical, or geographical surroundings shape psychological or moral traits in a character. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how surroundings affect this character and illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole.

2013. A *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, recounts the psychological or moral development of its protagonist from youth to maturity, when this character recognizes his or her place in the world. Select a single pivotal moment in the psychological or moral development of the protagonist of a *bildungsroman*. Then write a well-organized essay that analyzes how that single moment shapes the meaning of the work as a whole.

2014. It has often been said that what we value can be determined only by what we sacrifice. Consider how this statement applies to a character from a novel or play. Select a character that has deliberately sacrificed, surrendered, or forfeited something in a way that highlights that character’s values. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the particular sacrifice illuminates the character’s values and provides a deeper understanding of the meaning of the work as a whole.

2015. In literary works, cruelty often functions as a crucial motivation or a major social or political factor. Select a novel, play, or epic poem in which acts of cruelty are important to the theme. Then write a well-developed essay analyzing how cruelty functions in the work as a whole and what the cruelty reveals about the perpetrator and/or victim.

2016. Many works of literature contain a character who intentionally deceives others. The character’s dishonesty may be intended either to help or to hurt. Such a character, for example, may choose to mislead others for personal safety, to spare someone’s feelings, or to carry out a crime. Choose a novel or play in which a character deceives others. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the motives for that character’s deception and discuss how the deception contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

VI. Deductive Writing vs. Inductive Writing

Type of Writing	Deductive	Inductive
Key Traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In deductive writing, the central point—the thesis—is stated clearly in the introductory paragraph (usually as the final sentence).• The body paragraphs to follow are logically ordered by importance, each containing a topic sentence that makes a claim about one aspect of the thesis.• Each body paragraph is developed through explanation, examples, and analysis; and the evidence provided always supports the initial claim. The conclusion always reinforces the thesis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inductive writing reserves the thesis for the concluding paragraph. When you write inductively, you pose a central question, and then you seek an answer by carefully studying relevant evidence and making inferences from the evidence.• The introduction is used primarily to raise issues and questions, but the author’s view is withheld. (As a matter of fact, you may not be certain what your “final view” of the topic is until you get to the end of your essay.) Thus, an inductive essay seems less definitive (it doesn’t begin with a pre-conceived idea that must be proved) and more exploratory (it pursues questions in order to find the best possible answers).• Each body paragraph addresses a different aspect of the topic in order to clarify questions and establish evidence. In each body paragraph, the topic sentence is placed last, at the end of the paragraph, as more of a conclusion that’s based on the evidence presented. The writer may even interject doubt or explore both sides of an issue before arriving at a conclusion.