

CLEP® American Literature

AT A GLANCE

Description of the Examination

The American Literature examination covers material that is usually taught in a survey course at the college level. It deals with the prose and poetry written in the United States from pre-colonial times to the present. It tests knowledge of literary works—their content, their background and their authors—and requires an ability to interpret poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose. In addition, it tests a familiarity with the terminology used by literary critics and historians. The exam emphasizes fiction and poetry, and deals to a lesser degree with the essay, drama, and autobiography.

In both coverage and approach, the exam resembles the chronologically organized survey of American literature offered by many colleges. It assumes that candidates have read widely and developed an appreciation of American literature, know the basic literary periods, and have a sense of the historical development of American literature. The test contains approximately 100 questions to be answered in 90 minutes. Some of these are pretest questions that will not be scored.

Knowledge and Skills Required

Questions on the American Literature exam require candidates to demonstrate one or more of the following skills in the approximate proportions indicated.

35–40% ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND AND INTERPRET PROSE WORKS AND POEMS

- Short poems
- Excerpts from long poems
- Excerpts from prose works

25–30% KNOWLEDGE OF LITERARY WORKS

- Authors
- Characters
- Plots
- Settings
- Style
- Themes

15–20% FAMILIARITY WITH CRITICAL TERMS

- Critical terms
- Verse forms
- Literary devices

15–20% KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SETTINGS

- Historical and social settings of specific works
- Relations between literary works
- Relations of specific works to literary traditions
- Influences on authors

The subject matter of the American Literature examination is drawn from the following chronological periods. The percentages indicate the approximate percentage of exam questions from each period.

- 15%** Beginnings–1800
- 20%** 1800–1865
- 20%** 1865–1910
- 20%** 1910–1945
- 25%** 1945–present

Study Resources

To prepare for the American Literature exam, you should read critically the contents of at least one anthology, which you can find in most college bookstores. Most textbook anthologies contain a representative sample of readings as well as discussions of historical background, literary styles and devices characteristic of various authors and periods, and other material relevant to the test. The anthologies do vary somewhat in their content, approach, and emphases; you are advised to consult more than one or to consult some specialized books on major authors, periods, and literary forms and terminology. You can probably obtain an extensive reading list of American literature from a college English department, library, or bookstore.

A survey conducted by CLEP® found that the following textbooks are among those used by college faculty who teach the equivalent course. You might purchase one or more of these online or at your local college bookstore. HINT: Look at the table of contents first to make sure it covers the time periods required for this exam.

Baym, ed., <i>Norton Anthology of American Literature</i> (W. W. Norton)
Belasco and Johnson, <i>Bedford Anthology of American Literature</i> (Bedford/St. Martin's)
Cain, <i>American Literature</i> (Penguin/Longman)
Cushman and Newlin, <i>Nation of Letters</i> (Brandywine/Blackwell)
Lauter, ed., <i>Heath Anthology of American Literature</i> (Wadsworth)
McMichael, <i>Anthology of American Literature</i> (Prentice Hall)
McQuade et al., <i>Harper American Literature, Single Volume Edition</i> (Longman)
Perkins and Perkins, <i>The American Tradition in Literature</i> (McGraw-Hill)

These resources, compiled by the CLEP test development committee and staff members, may help you study for your exam. However, none of these sources is designed specifically to provide preparation for a CLEP exam. The College Board has no control over their content and cannot vouch for accuracy.

public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/aufram.html
(Donna Campbell's American Lit page at Washington State)

societyofearlyamericanists.org
(Society of Early Americanists website)

Visit clep.collegeboard.org/earn-college-credit/practice for additional American literature resources. You can also find suggestions for exam preparation in Chapter IV of the *CLEP Official Study Guide*. In addition, many college faculty post their course materials on their schools' websites.

Sample Test Questions

The following sample questions do not appear on an actual CLEP examination. They are intended to give potential test-takers an indication of the format and difficulty level of the examination and to provide content for practice and review. For more sample questions and info about the test, see the *CLEP Official Study Guide*.

1. The poems of this seventeenth-century Massachusetts wife and mother were initially published in England in the 1650s.

The writer described is

- A. Abigail Adams
- B. Sarah Kemble Knight
- C. Mary Rowlandson
- D. Anne Bradstreet
- E. Julia Ward Howe

Lucy smiled, and Temple saw it was a smile of approbation. He sought and found a cottage suited to his taste; thither, attended by Love and Hymen, the happy trio retired; where, during many years of uninterrupted felicity, they cast not a wish beyond the little boundaries of their own tenement. Plenty, and her handmaid, Prudence, presided at their board, Hospitality stood at their gate, Peace smiled on each face, Content reigned in each heart, and Love and Health strewed roses on their pillows.

2. The form of the passage is that of
- A. an allegory
 - B. a burlesque
 - C. an epistle
 - D. a fable
 - E. a parody

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel...Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman...Under [slaveholding's] influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tigerlike fierceness.

3. Which of the following best describes the theme of this passage?
- A. Slaveholders were naturally cruel to enslaved people.
 - B. Women could be just as cruel slaveholders as men.
 - C. Slaveholders were not to be trusted, no matter how kind they might seem initially.
 - D. Enslaved people sometimes felt sorry for slaveholders.
 - E. Slaveholders were corrupted by the unchecked power of slaveholding.
4. The passage was taken from
- A. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
 - B. Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*
 - C. W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*
 - D. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*
 - E. Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America"
5. Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, and Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) are all sometimes referred to as
- A. romantics
 - B. modernists
 - C. regionalists
 - D. transcendentalists
 - E. naturalists

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown.
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked,
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
'Good-morning,' and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace;
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light;
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

6. The speaker's apparent response to the events described in the poem can best be characterized as one of
- A. concern
 - B. bewilderment
 - C. malice
 - D. remorse
 - E. anger
7. In which novel does the author suggest the vacancy of old orders of belief, ideals, or virtues by the image of sightless eyes looking down from a billboard?
- A. *The Great Gatsby*
 - B. *Light in August*
 - C. *The Sun Also Rises*
 - D. *To Kill a Mockingbird*
 - E. *Native Son*
8. Which of the following does NOT correctly match an author with a character he created?
- A. John Updike...Harry Angstrom
 - B. Philip Roth...Alexander Portnoy
 - C. Ralph Ellison...Bigger Thomas
 - D. J. D. Salinger...Holden Caulfield
 - E. Saul Bellow...Augie March

9. Toni Morrison examines the devastating effects of racism, abuse, and internalized self-hatred on an eleven-year-old child named Pecola Breedlove in
- A. *Tar-Baby*
 - B. *Beloved*
 - C. *The Color Purple*
 - D. *The Woman Warrior*
 - E. *The Bluest Eye*

Credit Recommendations

The American Council on Education has recommended that colleges grant three credits for a score of 50, which is equivalent to a course grade of C, on the CLEP American Literature exam. Each college, however, is responsible for setting its own policy. For candidates with satisfactory scores on the American Literature examination, colleges may grant credit toward fulfillment of a distribution requirement, or for a particular course that matches the exam in content. Check with your school to find out the score it requires for granting credit, the number of credit hours granted, and the course that can be bypassed with a passing score.

Answers to Sample Questions:

1-D; 2-A; 3-E; 4-D; 5-C; 6-B; 7-A; 8-C; 9-E