**Read the following poem by Richard Wilbur, published in 1949, carefully. Then, write an essay in which you analyze how the speaker describes the juggler and what the description reveals about the speaker. You may wish to consider poetic elements such as imagery, figurative language, and tone.**

“The Juggler” by Richard Wilbur

A ball will bounce; but less and less. It's not  
A light-hearted thing, resents its own resilience.  
Falling is what it loves, and the earth falls  
So in our hearts from brilliance,   
Settles and is forgot.  
It takes a sky-blue juggler with five red balls  
  
To shake our gravity up. Whee, in the air   
The balls roll around, wheel on his wheeling hands,   
Learning the ways of lightness, alter to spheres  
Grazing his finger ends,   
Cling to their courses there,   
Swinging a small heaven about his ears.  
  
But a heaven is easier made of nothing at all   
Than the earth regained, and still and sole within  
The spin of worlds, with a gesture sure and noble  
He reels that heaven in,   
Landing it ball by ball,   
And trades it all for a broom, a plate, a table.  
  
Oh, on his toe the table is turning, the broom's   
Balancing up on his nose, and the plate whirls   
On the tip of the broom! Damn, what a show, we cry:   
The boys stamp, and the girls  
Shriek, and the drum booms  
And all come down, and he bows and says good-bye.  
  
If the juggler is tired now, if the broom stands  
In the dust again, if the table starts to drop  
Through the daily dark again, and though the plate  
Lies flat on the table top,  
For him we batter our hands  
Who has won for once over the world's weight.

Thoughts from an AP Reader: “Juggler” Question 1

by [Susan Barber](http://www.aplithelp.com/author/susan/)

Writing a timed essay for the AP exam on “Juggler” by Richard Wilbur was much like juggling; students had to manage a prompt asking them to analyze the juggler and the speaker’s attitude toward the juggler while considering poetic devices Wilbur detail the juggler and the speaker. Trevor Packer from College Board posted on Twitter last week that students “continue to find analyzing poetry more difficult than prose” in regard to this year’s AP Lit exam; writing about poetry may be the biggest challenge for students in AP Lit. After reading approximately 1,200 students essays, here are my observations and takeaways from this year’s reading.

**What Students Did Well:**

* Taking advantage of multiple entry points in the poem
* Addressing both literal and figurative meanings
* Identifying poetic devices

Even though I definitely scored more lower level essays than higher level, I was surprised at what students were able to accomplish in approximately 40 minutes. Essays scoring a 4 often offered good thoughts about the poem but failed to go deep or back up ideas with textual support. I came away encouraged that AP teachers are teaching students to find the point of the poem they connect to or identify with and enter the poem there.

**Where Students Fell Short**

* Failing to support analysis with evidence from the text
* Not answering all parts of the prompt
* Focusing on only one dimension of the poem
* Explaining the function of poetic devices

In spite of some good ideas, fewer students were able to write upper level essays on “Juggler.” The main reason for this was simply not developing ideas fully or offering textual support. This could be because students don’t have enough practice or the skill set to work at this level or there was just not enough time to handle a multiple-pronged prompt paired a difficult poem.

**Methods of Organization**

* Insights – each paragraph began with a big picture idea or theme further unpacked with textual evidence and/or devices linked back to the meaning
* Stanzas – analysis and devices are discussed in the order in which they are introduced
* Devices – the most formulaic of the methods rarely yielding an essay no higher than a 6

Essays in the upper half were typically organized by insight or stanzas feeling more organic in nature and less formulaic than device 1, device 2, and device 3; however, struggling writers and thinkers may find structure and security in organizing by device. If students choose to organize by device, they must be sure to include not only the identification of the device but also the function and how the device reinforces the overall theme.

**Takeaways for Analysis**

* **Give students tools to help them unpack complexity** within analysis such as contrasting ideas within a passage, utilizing transitions to emphasize a layering of ideas, or considering multiple meanings within a text.
* **Write not assuming the reader can make all of the connections**; clearly express each step in the thought process. I read several essays that told about how Wilbur uses imagery by describing the juggler  as “sky blue.” This is obvious. Students who took the extra step to discuss how the juggler who is on earth but wears sky-blue  highlights his ability to defy gravity – or the weight of the world – are answering the “so what” question. Teach students to ask and answer the “so what” question with every point.
* **Provide students with plenty of opportunity to practice analyzing poetry individually.**Poetry is most often studied as a class giving students the advantage of unpacking the meaning with a community of learners; this is probably the best way to learn and study poetry. The closer it gets to the end of the year, however, layers of scaffolding should gradually be removed until the student is practicing handling poetry on his or her own.
* **Teach structure;** students who wrote about the structure of the poem generally had upper level essays. Several students wrote about the first stanza ending mid-sentence “with five red balls” and the second stanza beginning with “To shake our gravity up” underscoring the overall theme of gravity and the juggler’s ability to defy it. Many students were also able to discuss the “But” at the beginning of stanza three and how it serves as the shift in the middle to a more complicated tasks (table, broom, and plate) and the meaning of this. Unpacking structure typically equates to higher-level thinking skills.
* **Always use an adjective before the words *diction*, *tone,*and *syntax****.* The poet uses words and sentences to write; we can all agree on that. Be specific with these terms. Discussing syntax doesn’t have to be overly complicated. By simply showing that Wilbur uses a series simple clauses such as “The boys stamp, and the girls / Shriek, and the drum booms / And all come down, and he bows and says good-bye” highlights the childlike tone, and students have effectively addressed syntax. A few students wrote about the placement of the word “up” in the phrase “To shake our gravity up” and how the unusual placement of “up” illustrates the juggler’s action.

**Takeaways for Writing**

* **Teach writing at the sentence level**; the upper level essays not only offered good analysis and organization but contained well-written sentences. I was surprised at the number of essays that had insightful thoughts and ideas but lacked sentence variety and an advanced or academic vocabulary; these essays could have easily scored higher but didn’t simply due to lack of maturity of writing style. Use mentor texts or anchor essays from previous AP exams for teaching syntax and allow students to experiment and take risks with their personal style throughout the year.
* **Practice sentence combining.**So many essays were written using simple sentences. Even if student are not able to write with a mature style and voice, they can combine simple sentences. Consider the following sentences: “The juggler is sky blue. The sky blue represents freedom. The juggler feels free.” These can easily be combined to “The juggler wears ‘sky blue’ representing freedom showing that the juggler feels free.”
* **Write succinctly**; say what needs to be said in the briefest way possible. Don’t waste words on plot summary (even in a poem) or use unnecessary adjective or adverbs. Every word counts!

**Random notes**

* The date included in this year’s prompt (1949) caused many students to analyze this poem in relation to World War II. Several students discussed how the red balls represented bombs and the “shaking gravity up” represented the chaos of war. I always instruct my students to take advantage of everything given to them including dates in the prompt, the title of the work, and footnotes and will continue to do this; however, students should not force a connection they are not able to back up with clear evidence from the text.
* Many students saved Q1 for their last essay. I love that teachers are helping students know that they have choice and control in the exam. Students should have a plan of how they will answer the essay questions. AP teachers have different opinions on what order essays should be written; the thoughts on this are not as important as the concept that the student should have a plan before test day. Empower students to take the test rather than the test take them.
* Working with students is fun. I read a whole essay comparing the juggler to the Cat in the Hat, outlining a recipe for sausage balls because I might be hungry after reading essays all day, or relating the up and down motion of the balls to the Chicago Blackhawks season. My favorite line, however, was “Damn, what an essay” concluding a very well written essay playing off the “Damn, what a show” phrase in the poem.