

The Top 10 AP English Literature Reading List

You can't argue with hard statistics. The College Board has kept track of the most frequently cited the AP English Literature works from 1971 through 2014. This portion of the list is devoted directly to these ten works. It could be of great importance that you at the very least gain some familiarity with these titles, as the likelihood that one of these will appear somewhere on the test is pretty high.

1. *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a long read but it is definitely worth the time spent due to the way it tackles race and bigotry and its effect on the minds of the parties involved in issues of race. *Invisible Man* covers race, identity, ideology, and stereotypes. Further, it tells the story of a marginalized character who eventually overcomes alienation, invisibility, and defies a society that is unable and unwilling to recognize the individuality of the black man. This is the most frequently referenced title on the AP English Literature reading list at 26 citations since 1971.

2. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte

Wuthering Heights is one of the most widely regarded pieces on the AP English Literature reading list. *WH* is a good example of Gothic Romanticism that deals heavily with questions of emotion and violence. It's particularly accessible and discusses class and gender comfortably from the perspective of a woman. This is one of the most frequently cited literary works on the AP Literature exam. It has been included in some form or fashion on 20 different years' tests since 1971.

I personally recommend analyzing this piece while looking out for the poetry and mastery of composition that Emily Bronte wields in her only published novel. *Wuthering Heights* is long but meaningful read.

3. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens

Great Expectations is another Victorian novel that is very frequently included on the AP Literature exam. Since 1971, it has been cited 18 times. It is considered a Victorian Bildungsroman, German for "Novel of Formation," simply described as a coming-of-age story.

Great Expectations is probably one of the most versatile titles on this list because it addresses many of the Victorian-era genres of the novel, including satire, crime, Silver Fork, Newgate, Gothic, serial fiction, romance, politics, and history. Read Dickens' *Great Expectations* as if you need to mark a trail to get back to the beginning, your starting point. With Dickens, it's about the particular points he mentions. Those points throughout the story inform your reading of *Great Expectations*, not the purpose of the novel itself.

Make sure you don't focus on plot with any Dickens piece. Plots are his weakest point. Concentrate on instances of his beautiful use of language.

4. *King Lear* by William Shakespeare

King Lear, referenced 17 times since 1971, is the most frequently cited work by Shakespeare.

King Lear is a brutal play containing themes ranging from familial love and duty to anger and deception. It's a play that provides you with many different elements of story to discuss as well as elements of style. The actual story is too complicated to briefly summarize, so trust the numbers and read this play before taking the test.

5. *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky

The main theme of *Crime and Punishment* is redemption via suffering. This is another long but worthwhile read at 545 pages. The purpose of *Crime and Punishment* is to provide a psychological analysis of the young Raskolnikov's crime to reveal how this psychological analysis itself keeps us imprisoned. Intellectualizing events, says Dostoevsky, keeps us imprisoned.

As the name tells us, Crime and Punishment and their relationship to each other are major themes in the story. Think about questions of sacrifice when reading studying this piece. Nihilism, the superhero complex, alienation, and poverty are also analyzed at length.

6. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

Heart of Darkness is lauded on many of the AP English Literature prep message boards as a go-to literary work for the free response section with good reason. It's a relatively short novella and an interesting read involving mystery, psychology, and adventure. *Heart of Darkness* is particularly useful in questions about the modern world in that it was somewhat prophetically written. It deals with the question of imperialist greed particularly pointedly.

Above all else, *Heart of Darkness* effectively explores and answers questions about morality and how the ambiguity of right and wrong can justify actions. Keep this in mind.

7. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte

Jane Eyre is a highly cited Victorian Romantic novel. At its core, this is a story of a woman yearning for more than what traditional society would allow her to have. Not only is it well known, it's more relevant today due to the recent push for social equity for women.

8. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain

Huck Finn is probably one of the best-known titles on this list among American students and with good reason. It's rich and complex, yet decipherable by students. If, perhaps, you're asked about the era of Slavery or Reconstruction, *Huck Finn* should really come to mind. It relentlessly discusses slavery and racism and the hypocrisy of civilized society. Consider the Mississippi River a symbol for remaining in the middle of the road on issues of race and use that to inform your reading of *Huck Finn*.

9. *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville

Moby Dick is universally accepted as an expansive, masterful work of fiction. However, Melville himself described this novel as a meditation on America. Read key portions of this text at least and gain an understanding of Melville's particular use of symbolism. There are many pertinent symbols that may appear on the AP English Literature exam.

10. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce

Another bildungsroman, coming-of-age story, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is an examination of how morality and religion can confine the artist. *A Portrait* reflects Joyce's own development as a young boy through adulthood at university. Read *A Portrait* with an eye for Joyce's stream of consciousness style. As Stephen, the main character, develops morally and psychologically, the style of Joyce's writing adapts and grows, so to speak. Utilize this title on questions of how style can inform the meaning of the development of characters.

The Lost Generation

It could be of use to you to compartmentalize your reading list in terms of time period. For instance, take the Lost Generation. Many of the most frequently cited literary works from 1911 to 1914 were written by Lost Generation, World War I era, authors. Not only is this an interesting time period that seems to be receiving more attention as the years draw on, many of the following titles from this era reflect the distinct American voice in literature in a lyrical, interesting, and unique way.

11. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a good example of a stylistic masterwork, which you can benefit from knowing. Hurston juxtaposes the Southern Black dialect with the voice of a literary narrator. If you're asked about her work, the chances are that an understanding of her style and structure will score you points.

12. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Probably one of the best-known Lost Generation literary works, *The Great Gatsby* has become iconic in high school English Literature education. F. Scott Fitzgerald's work has come to represent the Jazz Age in America. If you were asked about early-20th century American society, *The Great Gatsby* would be a kind of touchstone work to analyze.

13. *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, his fifth novel, would be a good example for you to use if asked about stream of consciousness, how that style develops tone, and how that style aids in character development. It's written in 59 chapters from 15 points of view that develop each character in manageable chunks, which is made much more easily understood by the intimate tone of stream of consciousness writing. Furthermore, it's viewed as part of the foundation of the Southern Renaissance.

14. *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner

Faulkner's fourth novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, is another exercise in style. He used stream of consciousness writing once more to tell a personal story of fear about the corruption of family values. *The Sound and the Fury* provides, most of all, a pathway to impress a reader. This is a difficult book to decipher, but, if you can get a handle on how Faulkner utilizes point of view within it, this piece can be of great value to you in both the multiple choice and free response sections of the exam.

15. *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway

The Sun Also Rises represents the pinnacle, in my opinion, of the Iceberg Theory. That is to say that Hemingway's style of characterization and description, likely considered sparse by most, actually inspired a curiosity in readers that could only have been intentional.

This novel is not only representative of Hemingway's style; it is representative of the Lost Generation in itself, insofar as it chronicles fictionalized stories of American expatriates in Europe.

Literature WWI – Present

The following literary works appear on the College Board's most frequently cited list and were published after WWI. These titles can be useful references to this time period in particular.

16. *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller

Catch-22 comments on war by reducing it to a bureaucratic concern. Use this literary work in discussions of plot and how devices, like the Catch-22 rule which constitutes the reason that Heller wrote this piece, serve to form the plot of a story.

17. *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

Ceremony is a commentary on how tradition and spirituality can serve as a source of healing. It takes place from the point of view of a service-age Native American man who returns from World War II with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. He is mentally unstable and turns to alcohol to ease his mind, but, eventually, he returns to his spirituality, healing from it.

18. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

Beloved explores Mother-Daughter relationships and the psychological impact that slavery has had on the African-American community in this country. Use *Beloved* to comment on the importance of identity and also community.

19. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel set in rural Georgia in the 1930s. It deals with racism and sexism, along with women's rights. The power of language also plays an important role in *The Color Purple*. Walker writes Celie's letters in a way that reflects her progression in emotional and psychological development. This development through language reinforces the idea that access to language, the ability to express one's self, is integral in the development of a sense of self.

20. *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams

Williams used much of his own personal experience in writing *The Glass Menagerie*. This is a four-character play with a main theme of accepting reality. Each character in *The Glass Menagerie* retreats into their own world to escape the realities to which they cannot relate. Look for this selection in free response prompts about symbolism. Laura's array of delicate glass animals is the single strongest symbol in the play and a strong symbol in general. This *Glass Menagerie* comes to represent Laura herself and her escape her own illusory world.

Shakespeare

Many of William Shakespeare's works appear on the most frequently cited list. Surely you've studied Shakespeare if you're preparing to take the AP English Literature exam now, but it couldn't hurt to refresh your memory of the following works by the Bard of Avon.

21. *Othello*

Othello is a story of love and deception built upon a soldier's insecurity with his life outside of soldiering. Questions and prompts about *Othello* may be concerned with issues of an isolated character and characteristics that contribute to that isolation.

22. *The Tempest*

One of the prominent themes in *The Tempest* is the artist in relation to his creation. Prospero can be viewed as a kind of artist, in that he controls the fate of every other character. It's as if Shakespeare inserted himself into the story as Prospero. *The Tempest* is widely regarded as Shakespeare's "Farewell" performance.

23. *The Merchant of Venice*

The Merchant of Venice is important to your preparation for the AP English Literature exam because it covers a timeless debate about racial and religious supremacy. This work could appear on either the multiple choice or free response sections because it explores the concept of dynamic characters using a culturally-charged and well-defined example: Shylock the Moneylender.

25. *Macbeth*

Macbeth is somewhat of a cautionary tale warning against the allure of evil as a means of power. Studying *Macbeth* is a good opportunity for you to develop your critical analysis skills in tragedy.

The Classics

The classical works also enjoy frequent citations on the AP Literature exam. These 5 classic works could appear on the multiple choice section of the test as well as on the free response section..

27. **Candide* by Voltaire

Understand *Candide* to be a unique coming-of-age story. It's a satirical novella that questions the efficacy or even the very purpose of remaining optimistic in the face of the great hardships of the world. Keep in mind that *Candide* is a unique take on the bildungsroman, and it's a relatively short read.

28. *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles

Oedipus Rex (The King) demonstrates a unique take on the Greek Tragedy. Rather than utilizing the sealed fate-type of arrangement that would have made sense to the audience of the time, Sophocles made Oedipus' faults contribute to his downfall.

29. *Medea* by Euripides

Medea contains some feminist undertones, a revolutionary occurrence for the time. Medea wants to take control of her own life in a patriarchal society, a task that drives her to the extreme of committing murder. Furthermore, the structure of the play as it was actually performed could be of interest to you. In every scene, the only actors are Medea and someone else.

30. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley**

Frankenstein represents, arguably, the first science fiction story but does so while remaining true to Shelley's Gothic and Romantic roots. A circumstantial theme within *Frankenstein* that could be need-to-know information for you is that the entire novel is a study in how power can corrupt. The power of knowledge allows Victor to animate "The Beast." The power of his hatred for his creation pushes him toward his own death. The story in itself is a study in power and its dangers.

**Candide* was first published in 1759. While it does not necessary belong in a group with the ancient plays, it is still considered a classic literary work.

***Frankenstein* was first published in 1818. Though it doesn't match the time period of the other works on this list, it still could be considered a literary classic to which many other literary works can be considered intertextually related, like the other selections in this section.

Other Helpful Texts

The list above is full of familiar titles. If you can use a title from the following list of works not referenced as often yet still literary, you may be able to score points for the breadth of your literary knowledge.

31. *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams

Streetcar is considered one of the greatest American plays of all time. Like *The Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar* also deals with the interplay between reality and fantasy and is considered at least vaguely autobiographical. Consider reading this piece along with *Menagerie*.

32. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

Things Fall Apart chronicles the life of a Nigerian and comments on the effect of British colonialism and Christianity. Read this novel if you're searching for a piece that comes from a different culture. Also, check out the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o if you're interested in African perspectives on fiction.

33. *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa

Joy Kogawa displays her mastery of the imagery of serenity in *Obasan*. This piece is rife with examples of figurative language.

34. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee

Albee challenges the prevailing notions of success for both individuals and families in this play. This is one more work that comments on reality vs. fantasy.

35. *Wise Blood* by Flannery O'Connor

O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, deals with the crisis of faith that can follow the return of those who have seen war. Consider how O'Connor's style affects the exploration of faith in *Wise Blood*.