

UIL Literary Criticism

Student Activity Conference Fall 2018

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The Absolute Basics: Introducing the Contest to Coaches New to the Challenge

The UIL Literary Criticism contest exists to challenge the student whose interest in reading extends into the intellectual realm of literary analysis. That the contest is one of several academic contests that allow individuals to advance to the next level as members of a first-place team should be recognized as an opportunity to foster discussion of the literature among our students. All in all, discussion promotes analysis, and analysis promotes understanding. Understanding is foundational for interpretation, and an understanding of literature is itself fostered through an understanding of context, context that is best handled with the language of literary analysis, as found, for our purposes, in the Harmon-Holman *Handbook to Literature*.

The contest's four parts, as they appear on each of the six tests (two invitationals, one district, one regional, and one state) can be seen as supportive of one another in a movement from knowledge, through recognition and application, to discovery and application.

The sixty-five items that make up the scored portion of the test are multiple choice. The thirty items that cover basic knowledge are drawn from the main body and the appendices of the *Handbook to Literature*, which is a non-exhaustive introduction to terms "variously defined, discussed, explained, and illustrated." Note, please, that the terms a high school-level student who is encountering literature in a serious way for, perhaps, the first time are found alphabetized among terms that are usually reserved for the graduate student who is finding his or her own way into the ranks of published critics. Somewhere, thus, must emerge a cataloguing of terms foundational and not too esoteric and with which the student should have either some familiarity or some active knowledge; and while such a cataloguing does reduce the seemingly overwhelming quantity of terms that the student is expected to know, it does not throw out, irretrievably, all the terms that the serious high school student might not otherwise encounter. The creator of the test must have, for multiple-choice items, legitimate distracters. Very, very few of the multiple-choice options are not to be found somewhere in the *Handbook*.

Part one of the test asks the student to exhibit a knowledge of terms found either defined, discussed, or explained in the *Handbook*. Also expected is a familiarity with the authors whose names appear in the chronologies that make up the Outline of Literary History: British and American, which is found in the *Handbook* immediately after the alphabetized terms. The student's familiarity with these authors should begin with their status as recipients of the Nobel Prize and the Pulitzer Prizes for literature; their familiarity with the authors, especially the ones writing before the Prizes were established, should begin with the Outline of Literary History. Both of these approaches should be reinforced with some knowledge of these authors' involvement in literary movements and with specific genres; this knowledge can be gleaned from the *Handbook's* index as well as from the discussions found in the main body of the *Handbook*. The coach might consider that time devoted to the study of both the Outline and the Prizes lists should reflect how relatively little point value is associated with these items. The coach should also recognize that a team, over the course of several years, can find ways to put fellow team members to work on study, including association and memorization, techniques.

Part two asks the student to exhibit an understanding of the literature listed on a particular season's Literary Criticism reading list. The multiple-choice items are constructed so that it is with more than a passing knowledge of the novel's plotline, the play's main characters' actions, and the subject matter of the poems that a student can successfully compete. I attempt, in my approach, to dissuade the student from relying on study guides.

Parts three and four invite the student to explore (in the time allowed) literature he or she has most likely not encountered. Specifically, the student encounters, for the first time, a work of literature, most frequently a poem. The literature's attributes—if it is a poem, its form, its rhyme scheme, its basic metrical pattern, as well as its thematic concerns and its reliance on figures of speech—become subject to immediate analysis. In addressing the third part's fifteen questions, the student might chose to read the multiple-choice items, usually four or five (in order that the student's time is not divided among too many new pieces), before reading the literary piece itself. In addressing part four's required (but not scored) tie-breaking essay prompt, the student is asked to take both his or her knowledge and analytical abilities and respond to a specific aspect of a literary piece—its tone, its theme, for example. The work is most often a poem or an excerpt of a poem.

An ideal test would ensure that associations can be discovered among its four parts, threads of interest, background, or technique founded in literary contexts. Because the student will be spending quite a bit of time with the readings—the novel, the play, the poems, and because, percentage-wise, the twenty two-point items addressing these readings constitute a good portion of the test, I feel that when I am able to give immediate purpose to the learning of terms, genres, movements that are somehow contributory to an understanding of the readings, I have done some good. Additionally, when I give emphasis to some of what is discovered while reading and rereading the novel, the play, and the poems by, in the third part of the test, giving the student opportunity to recognize in literature read for the first time something of what, for instance, O'Brien, Shaw, and Frost do in the works with which the student has spent so much time preparing for part two of the test, I am doing, again, a good thing. Obviously, this endeavor can only be appreciated over the course of the UIL season; relatively few are the terms either defined, discussed, explained, or illustrated that could possibly "appear" in one way or another on each test. To know something of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* is to have knowledge of symbolism, *redende namen*, American romanticism, Colonial America, *roman à clef*, Herman Melville, chiaroscuro, *Twice-Told Tales*, and the Transcendental Club.

Master List of Terms Tested

— sampled from state director's web page through the UIL academic contests page <http://www.uiltexas.org/academics/literary-criticism> —

The first column details the year and test in which the term found in the second column serves as a correct answer; the remaining four columns offer the distractors used in a particular test item.

I do not mind sending as an attachment a Word file that the coach and his or her team can manipulate in a manner that serves them best. Contact me: mbernier@blinn.edu.

Please contact me when you find a typo, inconsistency, or anything more serious.

Note that the variety of distractors and, indeed, the terms themselves follows the editorial decisions that have characterized each succeeding edition of *The Handbook to Literature*. We are currently using the twelfth edition.

Use Control + F to find a term.

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|--------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 2014 S | elision | apocope | caesura | hiatus | metathesis |
| 2014 S | Revolutionary Period | Colonial Period | Naturalistic Symbolistic | Realistic Period | Romantic Period |
| 2014 S | concrete poetry | bouts-rimès | collage | montage | telestich |
| 2014 S | Dead Sea Scrolls | Apocrypha | <i>belles-lettres</i> | liturgical drama | sesquipedalian |
| 2014 S | heroic quatrain | ballad stanza | common meter | englyn | short meure |
| 2014 S | koine | archaism | dialect | dialectic | Doric |
| 2014 S | Geneva School | Apocalyptic | Ciceronians | Cockney School | Frankfort School |
| 2014 S | liminality | aesthetic distance | alienation effect | epiphany | luminism |
| 2014 S | tanka | haiku | kabuki | noh | senryu |
| 2014 S | Jacobean Age | Augustan Age | Caroline Age | Early Tudor Age | Edwardian Age |
| 2014 S | baroque | gazebo | gothic | rodomontade | vatic |
| 2014 S | naturalism | minimalism | postmodernism | rationalism | vorticism |