

CLEP® American Literature: At a Glance

Description of the Examination

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

In both coverage and approach, the examination 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. Any time candidates spend on tutorials and providing personal information is in addition to the actual testing time. An optional essay section can be taken in addition to the multiple-choice test. The essay section requires that two essays be written during a total time of 90 minutes.

Knowledge and Skills Required

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

- Knowledge of particular literary works — their authors, characters, plots, style, setting, themes, etc. (about 45 to 60 percent of the examination)
- Ability to understand and interpret short poems or excerpts from long poems and prose works presented in the test (about 25 to 40 percent of the examination)
- Knowledge of the historical and social settings of specific works, their relations to other literary works and to literary traditions, and the influences on their authors (about 10 to 15 percent of the examination)
- Familiarity with critical terms, verse forms and literary devices (about 5 to 10 percent of the examination)

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% The Colonial and Early National Period (Beginnings–1830)

25% The Romantic Period (1830–1870)

20% The Period of Realism and Naturalism (1870–1910)

25% The Modernist Period (1910–1945)

15% The Contemporary Period (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 should also read some of the major novels that are mentioned or excerpted in the anthologies, such as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Chopin's *The Awakening*. Other writers whose major works you should be familiar with include Wheatley, Melville, Crane, James, Cather, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Ellison and Morrison. You can obtain an extensive reading list of American literature from a college English department, library or bookstore. In addition, many college faculty post their course materials on their schools' websites.

A recent survey conducted by CLEP® found that the following textbooks (first editor listed only) 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> (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> (PrenticeHall)
McQuade et al., <i>Harper Single Volume American Literature</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 are designed specifically to provide preparation for a CLEP exam. The College Board has no control over their content and cannot vouch for accuracy.

www.Bartleby.com

<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/table.html>

(Perspectives in American Literature — includes index of authors, themes, writing assignments)

<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/index.html>

(Donna Campbell's American Lit page at Washington State)

<http://faculty.mc3.edu/hhalbert/sea/>

(Society of Early Americanists website)

Visit www.collegeboard.com/clepprep 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*.

Questions 1–3 refer to the following poem.

If ever two were one, then surely we,
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee, give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay,
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray,
The while we live, in love let's so persevere
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

1. Which of the following best describes the poem's rhyme scheme?

- (A) abcabcdefdef
- (B) aabbccddeeff
- (C) abcdabcdabcd
- (D) aabbaaccabab
- (E) ababdcdefef

2. Lines 7–8 (“My love...recompense.”) are best paraphrased by which of the following?

- (A) We love each other intensely, but will eventually have to pay the price for our love.
- (B) I ought to love you more than I do, but I am already consumed with love for someone else.
- (C) If you loved me as much as I love you, I would be happier than the richest person alive.
- (D) My love for you is strong, but its intensity changes according to how much I think you love me.
- (E) My love for you is all-consuming and can only be satisfied by your loving me in return.

3. The poem was written by

- (A) Phillis Wheatley
- (B) Amy Lowell
- (C) Adrienne Rich
- (D) Anne Bradstreet
- (E) Emily Dickinson

4. Which of the following writers was known for his novels about Americans confronting European society?

- (A) Frank Norris
- (B) Jack London
- (C) Henry James
- (D) Theodore Dreiser
- (E) William Dean Howells

5. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* satirizes which literary and cultural movement?

- (A) Transcendentalism
- (B) The Great Awakening
- (C) Progressivism
- (D) Regionalism
- (E) Imagism

6. Which of these writers is often credited with inventing the genre of the “detective story”?

- (A) Dashiell Hammett
- (B) Lydia Maria Child
- (C) Kate Chopin

(D) Edgar Allan Poe

(E) O. Henry

7. The title of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* refers to the fact that the narrator

(A) has become invisible as the result of a lab experiment gone awry

(B) has the sense that no one really sees him as an individual

(C) is a hermit who never has contact with other people

(D) is a ghost who observes the living as they go through their lives

(E) rebels against the mass society that treats all people exactly the same, regardless of race or class

8. Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs are best known as

(A) naturalists

(B) Romantics

(C) symbolists

(D) science fiction writers

(E) Beat writers

Credit Recommendations

The American Council on Education has recommended that colleges grant 6 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-B; 2-E; 3-D; 4-C; 5-A; 6-D; 7-B; 8-E.