

4. Make sure you jot down notes that pertain to the assigned topic.

- Jot down quotations or at least close paraphrases.
  - Jot down everything you know and remember about the assigned topic.
5. Make sure you are clear about what you are going to say.
- Write a sentence or two that make a positive and focused statement about the topic.
  - Make sure these sentences address all of the issues and subpoints specified in the prompt.

6. Write your essay. ☺

### Issues of Interpretation and Inference

There is a common misperception about topics that are open to multiple interpretations. Many people—many intelligent and educated people—mistakenly believe that if something is open to a number of interpretations, none of those interpretations can be wrong. A similar misperception is that all possible interpretations are equally valid.

You may even accept those two misperceptions and are right now planning the letter you are going to write to argue with us—so let's examine a few examples.

Consider the first stanza of a famous poem by Scottish poet Robert Burns:

O, my love is like a red, red rose,  
That is newly sprung in June.  
O, my love is like the melody,  
That is sweetly played in tune.

Certainly, the similes are open to interpretation. In what way(s) is Burns's love like a rose, specifically a red rose? Is she like a rose because she, too, is red? Burns goes on to say that this rose was "newly sprung in June," so perhaps his love is young, like a new June rose. Roses are generally regarded as beautiful, so perhaps Burns simply means that his love is beautiful.

Perhaps he means some combination of these—or all of these, plus a few we have not mentioned yet.

Some might say that roses in the florist shop are expensive, so maybe he is criticizing his love for being extravagant, for costing him too much money. Anyone who has tended a rose garden knows that roses are not the low-maintenance plants available. They are subject to insects, molds, wilt, and a whole host of other maladies. Perhaps, then, Burns is criticizing his love for being spoiled, high maintenance, demanding.

Chances are, though, he's not. Chances are the person who is eager to focus on the negative traits of the rose and transfer them to the subject of the poem is missing the point and offering an unsupportable or invalid interpretation. Anyone who would offer a valid and supportable interpretation must keep in mind that Burns's "rose" is "newly sprung in June." We must also take into account that the love is also "melody / That is sweetly played in tune."

Chances are the positive connotations of this sweet and in-tune melody would cancel out any negative interpretations we would want to attach to the rose. Burns is clearly not criticizing or complaining about his love. Just because there are many possible interpretations does not mean that they are all equally valid.

The same is true of an inference. Almost certainly you have had someone at some time take something you have said "the wrong way," getting angry or hurt or insulted and causing you to protest, "That's not what I meant," or "I didn't mean it that way."

Not every reader's or listener's inference reflects a complete or careful or accurate understanding of what the writer or speaker has actually said.

The key—as always when dealing with language and literature—is the text.

### The Difference between Interpretation and Inference

Inference is the thought process by which a person must think beyond whatever information is immediately before him or her to arrive at a conclusion. Katherine Mansfield never explicitly states that Miss Brill (see page 30) is saddened by the young couple's reaction to her fur stole, but the reader infers her sorrow from her actions in the closing paragraphs of the story:

On her way home she usually bought a slice of honey-cake at the baker's. It was her Sunday treat. Sometimes there was an almond in her slice, sometimes not. It made a great difference. If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present—a surprise—something that might very well not have been there. She hurried on the almost Sundays and struck the match for the kettle in quite a dashing way.

But to-day she passed the baker's by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room—her room like a cupboard—and sat down on the red eiderdown. She sat there for a long time. The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly, quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.

The ability to examine a text and infer meaning is an important skill for the Advanced Placement student. It is a skill that can be learned, but like all skills, it must be practiced. Also like most skills, there are more effective and less effective ways to arrive at a conclusion.

Contrary to what you might believe, while there most certainly is a wide range of appropriate inferences to be drawn from most texts, there is also a fairly wide range of *inappropriate inferences* that can be drawn from a text.

When one is understanding on an inferential level, one might indeed be wrong. The processes of drawing an inference mirror the thought process of inductive and deductive reasoning.

**Inductive reasoning** is the process of drawing a conclusion (an inference) from a variety of independent facts, details, etc. When a pollster surveys 10,000 people about their opinions on school safety and then reports that Americans feel their schools are safe, the pollster has arrived at that conclusion by inductive reasoning.

When a soap company chooses a certain number of urban neighborhoods, towns, and suburban communities to test-market a new soap product and then decides not to put the soap on the market, the company has arrived at that decision by inductive reasoning.

In order for the inference or conclusion arrived at through inductive reasoning to be valid, certain conditions must be met. If any of them are not, the reasoning is flawed, and the conclusion will be faulty, if not downright invalid.

1. All of the facts, details, etc., that contributed to the conclusion must be true and verifiable or mutually agreed upon by all parties. There must also be a large enough number of examples on which to base a valid conclusion.

- e.g., Memorial Day always falls on a Monday. Presidents Day always falls on a Monday. Christmas and Easter fall on Mondays. Monday must be the day for big holidays.

*It is not factually true that Christmas and Easter fall on Mondays (in fact, Easter never falls on Monday), so the conclusion cannot be valid. Also, four examples is not nearly enough to support such a broad conclusion. All one would have to do is provide one or two non-Monday holidays to refute this conclusion.*

On June 17, the sun rises a minute earlier and sets a minute later than on June 16. Likewise, on June 18, the sun rises a minute earlier and sets a minute later than on June 17. The same phenomenon occurs on June 19 and June 20. Eventually, the sun will rise so early and set so late that there will be no night.

*Clearly, this is an invalid conclusion, even though it seems based on accurate observation and reporting of a valid phenomenon. The problem is that, had the observer made a few more observations, he would have seen the phenomenon reverse itself to produce shorter days and longer nights.*

2. The conclusion must follow logically from the facts, details, etc., that contributed to the conclusion. A conclusion that does not is called a *non sequitur*.

- e.g., All of the boys and girls in Mr. Kaplan's homeroom wore red polo shirts yesterday. Red polo shirts must have been on sale at the department store.

*Of all the reasons for all of the students to wear identical shirts on the same day, a sale in a particular store is probably one of the least likely.*

Julius Caesar took a day from February and added it to the month that bore his name, July. Caesar Augustus also took a day from February and added it to "his" month, August. They must have enjoyed the warm weather and wanted to make the summer longer.

*The logic of this conclusion is flawed on at least two levels. Clearly the name or number of a particular day has nothing to do with that day's weather, but to conclude that Caesar's primary reason for adding a day to a month named in his honor was related to the climate—and not his egotism—is certainly a non sequitur.*

Deductive reasoning is the process of examining one or more fairly specific ideas or premises, that are already known and using them to arrive at a conclusion (inference) about something that is not yet known. If that soap company knows that environmentally friendly products appeal to upper-middle-class professionals, and that these upper-middle-class professionals usually live either in the suburbs or in certain "gentrified" neighborhoods in the city, their decision to market their environmentally friendly soap in those areas is the result of deductive reasoning.

Pollsters love to infer future events based on past outcomes. If they know that Independent male voters aged 30 and over tend to vote for any non-mainstream candidate, and they see that Candidate X is basing his campaign on the fact that he is the offspring of an illegal immigrant and a cancer-surviving woman, their conclusion that this candidate will appeal to this demographic is based on deductive reasoning.

Again, however, certain conditions must be met in order for an inference based on deductive reasoning to be valid. If any of them are not, the reasoning is flawed, and the conclusion will be faulty if not downright invalid.

1. Both premises must be agreed upon as true by all parties. *To base an argument on a premise that not everyone accepts as true is called begging the question.*

- e.g., Since *Huckleberry Finn* is such an offensive, racist book, it should be dropped from the curriculum and removed from the school library.

*In order for the decision to drop the book from the curriculum to be at all valid, we must first make sure that everyone involved agrees with the premise that it is "an offensive, racist book."*

Everyone knows that multiple-choice questions serve no purpose, so our mid-term and final exams should contain only essay questions.

Does "everyone know" that multiple-choice questions "serve no purpose"?

2. The conclusion must follow logically from the premises. A conclusion that does not follow logically from the premises is another form of *non sequitur*.

- e.g., Listening to music is enjoyable, but the hearing impaired cannot listen to music. They must be very unhappy.

*Let's assume for the sake of argument that we all generally agree with the first premise, that listening to music is enjoyable—if we didn't, we would be begging the question. Even then, however, the conclusion that the hearing impaired are unhappy does not necessarily follow from the fact that they cannot hear music. Thus, even with valid premises, we have an invalid conclusion or inference.*

One of the stated purposes for sports programs in high school is to teach sportsmanship, so students who do not participate in sports never get to learn this important attitude.

*Unless it's true that participation in sports is the only way to learn sportsmanship, the conclusion does not follow the premise—even though the premise is true.*

3. To prove the validity of a conclusion (or inference), the arguer should be absolutely clear about all of the steps between the initial premises and the final conclusion. To arrive at even a valid conclusion without revealing all of the points that led there is to make a type of *non sequitur* often called a *quantum leap*.

- e.g., If all humans breathe air, and all politicians are humans, they should see the need to pass this anti-pollution legislation.

*Both of the premises are true, and the conclusion might actually be something worth considering, but there are quite a few ideas that need to be considered on the way from politicians being human to the passage of clean air legislation—the health benefits of clean air, something about the legislation's being in their own best interests, etc.*

- e.g., So much marine life is threatened by commercial overfishing, they should just ban seafood altogether.

*To dismiss another's argument on the basis of a quantum leap is to fall into the logical fallacy of the slippery slope.*

- e.g., If we relax the dress code to allow jeans on Friday, soon kids will be coming to school in their pajamas.

*First, regardless of how many amendments are made to the dress code, it is highly unlikely that pajamas will ever really be allowed. Second, the progression from jeans on Friday to pajamas involves many more than the single step suggested here.*

- e.g., Giving women the right to vote will be the destruction of the American family!

Inference, then, takes available information and looks outward to a prediction or conclusion. An inference can be inappropriate or invalid if it is not based on facts, an accurate understanding of the facts, or leaves out important steps in the reasoning process.

Interpretation, on the other hand, examines the available information and strives to understand it on more than only a literal level. There are two significant clues to the condition of Miss Brill's fur piece. First is the description of the fur essentially from Miss Brill's perception:

She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the dim little eyes. "What has been happening to me?" said the sad little eyes. Oh, how sweet it was to see them snap at her again from the red eiderdown!... But the nose, which was of some black composition, wasn't at all firm. It must have had a knock, somehow. Never mind—a little dab of black sealing-wax when the time came—when it was absolutely necessary...

Apparently, the fur is old—dulled with "moth powder," its "dim little" and "sad little" eyes lifeless, and the artificial nose soft and in need of sealing wax. Nevertheless, at least in Miss Brill's eyes, the beloved fur piece is fully presentable, and she is pleased to be wearing it again.

Then, toward the end of the story, Katherine Mansfield provides the girl's perception of the same fur:

"It's her fu-ur which is so funny," giggled the girl. "It's exactly like a fried whiting."

This assessment is not a complete contradiction of the earlier one, but it does cast a different light on how the reader views what Miss Brill was so fond of. The fur is old and shabby.

This understanding of Miss Brill's fur is not an inference because it does not rely on any prior knowledge or outside information on the part of the reader. By

simply reading the text and comparing the information provided in two different sections, the reader arrives at the conclusion that Miss Brill's fur is shabby. This is interpretation.

Like inference, there is usually going to be a range of acceptable interpretations to a particular passage. Also, like inference, however, there are going to be a number of inappropriate or invalid interpretations. The validity of an interpretation depends largely on the interpreter's ability to understand the meanings (both denotative and connotative) of the words, phrases, and sentences in the text.

Let's look at a few passages that rely heavily on reader inference and interpretation to establish their point. Then we'll look at how an Advanced Placement student might deal with questions about these passages on an exam.

### Letter to President Thomas Jefferson and Jefferson's Reply

Beginning in the sixteenth century, English Protestants who believed the religious reforms that had established the official Church of England were superficial and ineffective formed a series of "dissenter" or "separatist" groups. Each of these groups developed its own system of beliefs and practices, one of which was the baptism of adults instead of infants and baptism by full immersion into water. These "Baptists," as they came to be known, like every other minority religion in England, were allowed to practice their own faith, but were also required to attend Anglican worship services at least once a year and to pay a tax to the Anglican Church.

When England began to colonize America, the colonists brought with them the tension between the official Church of England and the several minority faiths that desired full religious freedom. Even after the Revolutionary War, the issue of whether any one faith or denomination could hold sway over any others was debated. The original Constitution did not provide any protections for minority religions and their adherents, so these protections were included in the First Amendment.

Many state Constitutions, however, still did not specify an individual's protection against being forced to participate in, or financially support, a church not of his or her choosing. In October 1801, the Danbury Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut sent the following letter to newly elected President Thomas Jefferson. In this famous letter, they express their concern about the lack in the Connecticut State Constitution of explicit protection of religious liberty. Their fear, as stated in their letter to Jefferson, was that, since the practice of their religion was seen as a privilege extended by the legislature and not as a right, laws could be enacted either prohibiting the practice of their religion or severely curtailing their rights as citizens because of such practice.

Here is their letter:

**1** The address of the Danbury Baptists Association in the state of Connecticut, assembled October 7, 1801. To Thomas Jefferson, Esq., President of the United States of America.

Sir,

**2** Among the many million in America and Europe who rejoice in your election to office; we embrace the first opportunity which we have enjoyed in our collective capacity, since your inauguration, to express our great satisfaction, in your appointment to the chief magistracy in the United States.<sup>1</sup> And though our mode of expression may be less courtly and pompous than what many others clothe their addresses with, we beg you, sir, to believe that none are more sincere.<sup>2</sup>

**3** Our sentiments are uniformly on the side of religious liberty—<sup>3</sup> that religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals—<sup>4</sup> that no man ought to suffer in name, person, or effects on account of his religious opinions—<sup>5</sup> that the legitimate power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbors.<sup>6</sup> But, sir, our constitution of government is not specific.<sup>7</sup> Our ancient charter together with the law made coincident therewith, were adopted as the basis of our government, at the time of our revolution.<sup>8</sup> and such had been our laws and usages, and such still are; that religion is considered as the first object of legislation; and therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the state)<sup>9</sup> we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights;<sup>10</sup> and these favors we receive at the expense of such

#### Sample Student Commentary

<sup>1</sup> This opening is potentially confusing, as it might sound to a modern reader as if the writer were confusing the president and chief justice. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, the phrase Chief Magistrate was used to describe the presidency. In his second inaugural address in 1793, George Washington himself referred to the president as the nation's "Chief Magistrate." Thus, the writer of this letter is using accepted terminology of the day.

<sup>2</sup> Are the writers, perhaps, sounding defensive that their letter might be ignored because of the simplicity of their language? Are they, perhaps, less educated and afraid that they will not be taken seriously? Or are they, perhaps, simply being polite in their greeting?

<sup>3</sup> A modern reader might wonder about the use of the dash, but before the early twentieth century, the dash was used as a substitute for several punctuation marks, including the comma and the colon. What follows each dash is essentially an appositive, additional information on what the writers mean by "religious liberty."

<sup>4</sup> First appositive.

<sup>5</sup> Second appositive.

<sup>6</sup> Third appositive.

<sup>7</sup> As the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States has been law for ten years, the writers must be referring to the Constitution of the State of Connecticut.

<sup>8</sup> Since the U.S. Constitution was not adopted as law until 1788, this sentence further suggests that the writers are talking about their state constitution.

<sup>9</sup> "Minor parts of the state" = "minorities."

<sup>10</sup> "The word choice and sentence structure are difficult here, but they are decipherable. Essentially, the writers are noting that their "privilege" to practice their minority religion exists—under their state law—as a "favor granted" by the government rather than an "inalienable right."

degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen.<sup>11</sup> It is not to be wondered at therefore; if those who seek after power and gain under the pretense of government and religion should reproach their fellow men—should reproach their Chief magistrate, as an enemy of religion, law and good order,<sup>12</sup> because he will not dare not assume the prerogatives of Jehovah and make laws to govern the kingdom of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Sir, we are sensible that the president of the United States is not the national legislator, and also sensible that the national government cannot destroy the laws of each state,<sup>14</sup> but our hopes are strong that the sentiments of our beloved president, which have had such genial effect already,<sup>15</sup> like the radiant beams of the sun, will shine and prevail through all these states and all the world, till hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the earth. Sir, when we reflect on your past services, and see a glow of philanthropy and good will shining forth in a course of more than thirty years we have reason to believe that America's God has raised you up to fill the chair of state out of that goodwill which he bears to the millions which you preside over.<sup>16</sup> May God strengthen you for your arduous task which providence and the voice of the people have called you to sustain and support you enjoy administration<sup>17</sup> against all the predetermined opposition of those who wish to raise to wealth and importance on the poverty and subjection of the people.<sup>18</sup>

5 And may the Lord preserve you safe from every evil and bring you at last to his heavenly kingdom through Jesus Christ our Glorious Mediator.

Signed in behalf of the association,

Nehemiah Dodge  
Ephraim Robbins  
Stephen S. Nelson

#### Sample Student Commentary

<sup>11</sup> The writers do not specify what the "degrading acknowledgments" are, but remember that in England, members of any minority denomination were required to attend an Anglican service at least once a year and pay a tax to the Anglican church.

<sup>12</sup> Jefferson had indeed been called an "enemy of religion" for his refusal to support any state or national "official religion" or to support any law requiring religious practice of individual citizens. At this point, however, it might not be clear whether the writers of this letter, by saying, "it is not to be wondered at..." are also criticizing Jefferson.

<sup>13</sup> Here it seems clear that they are not criticizing Jefferson. Surely, an association of clergy/persons would not support the president's assuming the prerogatives of God.

<sup>14</sup> Both are facts according to the Constitution of the United States.

<sup>15</sup> The writers do not specify which of Jefferson's "sentiments" have had this "genial effect" or what this "genial effect" is, but the context of the earlier paragraph supports a conclusion that the writers are still talking about the rights of citizens to practice minority religions without penalty.

<sup>16</sup> The "you" referred to in this sentence must be Jefferson, the man to whom this letter is addressed. The "he" must be "America's God."

<sup>17</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one denotation of enjoy is to put into a joyous condition, to make happy. Therefore, this sentence might literally be read: May God strengthen you...sustain and support you... [and] give joy to [your] administration.

<sup>18</sup> This final complaint might seem out of context unless we consider that the "expense of...degrading acknowledgments" complained of in the second paragraph might very well include mandatory attendance in a church not of the writers' choosing and mandatory tax payments to a church not of their choosing.

This is President Jefferson's response. While copies of the original draft of the letter still exist, the following reflects the letter as Jefferson edited and sent it:

Mr. President<sup>19</sup>

6 To messers Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.  
Gentlemen

7 The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction. My duties dictate a faithful and zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents,<sup>20</sup> & in proportion as they<sup>21</sup> are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

8 Believing with you<sup>22</sup> that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God,<sup>23</sup> that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship,<sup>24</sup> that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions,<sup>25</sup> contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,"<sup>26</sup> thus building a wall of separation between Church & State,<sup>27</sup> Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation<sup>28</sup> in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights,<sup>29</sup> convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.<sup>30</sup>

9 I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & your religious association assurances of my high respect & esteem.

(signed) Thomas Jefferson  
Jan. 1. 1802.

#### Sample Student Commentary

<sup>19</sup> Of the Danbury Baptist Association.

<sup>20</sup> As the writers of the Danbury letter expressed hope that their complaint would be heard, Jefferson is assuring them that he does listen to the citizenry of the United States.

<sup>21</sup> Grammatically, "they" must refer to Jefferson's "constituents."

<sup>22</sup> There will be a total of three relative clauses that specify on what points Jefferson agrees with the Danbury Association. This is the first.

<sup>23</sup> The second.

<sup>24</sup> And this is the third.

<sup>25</sup> Grammatically, we have ended the dependent clause that began "Believing with you..." "I" is subject of the main clause of this sentence.

<sup>26</sup> This is a direct quotation from the First Amendment.

<sup>27</sup> This is a famous and often debated phrase that has been subject to countless interpretations.

<sup>28</sup> Why would Jefferson emphasize not merely "the will" of the people, but "the supreme will of the nation"?

<sup>29</sup> To infer what Jefferson might mean by "all his natural rights," we must refer to the Danbury letter in which the writers complained that whatever "religious privileges (they) enjoyed" (as a minor part of the state) [they] enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights."

<sup>30</sup> In order to interpret this closing statement accurately and justly, you'd have to find what Jefferson may have meant by social duties. He did, in fact, write quite a bit about what an individual owed to his or her society, and these included support of "private charities" and "public purposes," as well as "contributing to the necessities of society." In this closing sentence of the body of the letter, Jefferson is saying that no individual has a "natural right" to ignore his "social duties."

### Sample Multiple-Choice Questions

1. When the writers of the Danbury letter call themselves “a minor part of the state” (paragraph 3), they most likely mean that they are

- A. underage.
- B. *small in number*.
- C. unimportant.
- D. lacking influence.
- E. a fledgling group.

2. President Jefferson does all of the following in his reply EXCEPT

- A. agree in principle.
- B. offer assurance.
- C. express gratitude.
- D. voice optimism.
- E. *promise assistance*.

3. One can reasonably infer from the Danbury writers’ assertion, “It is not to be wondered at therefore; if those who seek after power and gain under the pretense of government and religion should reproach their fellow men—should reproach their Chief magistrate, as an enemy of religion, law, and good order...” (paragraph 3), that

- A. Jefferson stood opposed to religion.
- B. the Danbury writers joined in criticism of Jefferson.
- C. *Jefferson had been criticized as “an enemy of religion.”*
- D. the Jefferson administration had become a “pretense of government.”
- E. the Danbury writers were criticizing the courts.

4. The most likely interpretation of “degrading acknowledgements” (paragraph 3) is

- A. *loss of status and property*.
- B. fines and imprisonment.
- C. public renunciation of doctrine.
- D. infringement on worship.
- E. denial of natural rights.

5. Which of the following phrases, as used in the passage, can be interpreted as synonymous with *religious faith*?

- A. religious privileges.
- B. *religious opinion*.
- C. faith and worship.
- D. sovereign reverence.
- E. rights of conscience.

### Answers and Explanations:

1. While (A) is certainly one denotation of “minor,” the writers of the letter are all, presumably, licensed preachers, members of an association, and probably adults. Certainly, nothing in the letter alludes to their age. (C) and (D) might be tempting, as the writers clearly feel as if they have been relegated to a secondary, powerless status, but they allude to themselves as “minor” in fact, not in attitude—and they acknowledge this “minor” status. Nothing suggests (E), and (E) is not a primary understanding of the term. **(B) is the most likely answer.** The writers are recognizing their status as a numerical minority in their society and are questioning the fact that their lack of numbers has resulted in their being dealt with unjustly by the laws of their state.
2. (A) is eliminated by the opening of the second paragraph of Jefferson’s letter: “Believing with you...” (B) is eliminated in the same paragraph by his quoting the portion of the First Amendment that addresses the Danbury Association’s concerns. (C) occurs in the opening of the letter. Jefferson’s assertion, “I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments...” eliminates (D). Nowhere in the letter, however, does Jefferson actually offer to take any kind of action or to help them in any way. His letter assures them of his agreement, reminds them of the “establishment clause” in the First Amendment, and expresses the hope that popular sentiment will evolve into a state of complete religious tolerance. **Thus, (E) is the correct answer.**
3. The idiom “it is not to be wondered at” is clearly the equivalent of today’s “no wonder.” The surface meaning of the sentence, then, can be paraphrased, “It is no wonder that those who use the pretext of government and religion to increase their own wealth and power criticize their President as anti-religion.” The point is that Jefferson has been thus criticized, not that he is opposed to religion. Thus, (A) is eliminated. (B) can be eliminated by the writers’ identifying Jefferson’s critics as “those who seek after power and gain under the pretense of government and religion,” a condemnation they would not levy on themselves when later they complain that they have been reduced to “poverty and subjection.” (D) is easily eliminated as, grammatically and syntactically, the phrase “pretense of government” refers to “those who seek after power and gain” and not the President or his administration. (E) would tempt only those students who misread the identification of the president at the “Chief magistrate.” **(C) is the only reasonable inference.** The explanation of why Jefferson has been criticized in this way follows the quoted clause (“because he will not, dare not, assume the prerogatives of Jehovah and make laws to govern the kingdom of Christ”). The Danbury writers are claiming that, because of Jefferson’s admitted stance on freedom of religion, it is no wonder those who hoped to use religion and government as a means of increasing their own wealth and power would criticize Jefferson as an “enemy of religion.”

4. What exactly the Danbury writers mean by this phrase is never made explicit. Historical precedent, of course, suggests that members of minority religions may have been required to attend worship and financially support the majority or "official" church. That they complain of being reduced to "poverty" might suggest they are fined, to infer "imprisonment" from "subjection" is a stretch, so (B) is eliminated. (C) and (D) are clearly unsupportable as the Danbury writers have been granted "religious privileges." The issue is that these privileges have come at a price. (E) might tempt some, but again, the Danbury writers have not really been denied the right. The right has been granted them, however, in the guise of a privilege or a "favor granted." Historically, we know that practitioners of a minority religion were granted a lower status as citizens, required to attend a church they did not choose and to pay a tax to that official church. **Thus, (A) is the best answer.**

5. (A) refers to the *right* to one's religious convictions, not to the *nature* of those convictions. (C) alludes to both content and practice, but a term cannot be a synonym of itself, so this is an unlikely choice. (D) refers to Jefferson's attitude toward the First Amendment. (E) is tempting, but it clearly refers to the right to one's own faith rather than to the faith itself. **(B) is the best answer.** The Danbury writers argue that one's "religious opinions" should not be the cause of pain, or loss of life or property. These "opinions" are clearly the substance of the religion, the faith.

### Sample free-response item one (text-based):

"Separation of Church and State" is an oft-quoted phrase and a hotly debated issue in the United States. Carefully read *Letter to President Thomas Jefferson and Jefferson's Reply*, in which the expression is first used. Then write a thoughtful, well-organized, and well-supported essay in which you analyze the Danbury writers' concerns and Jefferson's response and argue what Thomas Jefferson most likely meant when he coined the now-controversial phrase.

*A close reading of the two documents that first raised the issue of "the separation of Church and State" should give us strong clues to what Thomas Jefferson might have meant when he first used the phrase.<sup>1</sup> Writing in response to a letter from the Danbury Baptists Association, Jefferson wanted to assure them that it was, ultimately, against the law for them to be treated as second-class citizens because of their religious beliefs. The exact nature of the Baptist Association's complaint and the exact words of Jefferson's reply strongly suggest that Jefferson's idea of a "wall of separation of Church and State" meant a complete exclusion of the government from matters of religion.<sup>2</sup>*

*In October of 1801, members of the "Danbury Baptists Association in the State of Connecticut" wrote to then-President Thomas Jefferson, congratulating him on his recent election and inauguration as president and informing him that their "sentiments are uniformly on the side of religious liberty." What they mean by "uniformly" is open to interpretation. Perhaps they mean that they are unanimous in their support of religious liberty, or they might mean that they supported the "uniform" granting of this religious liberty. Both interpretations can be supported.<sup>3</sup> It is clear what the Baptists Association meant by "religious liberty," however, because they continue the same sentence<sup>4</sup> by saying, "religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals" and "that the legitimate power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbors." This makes it pretty clear what the Danbury Association believes is the government's role in enforcing religious practice: none.<sup>5</sup>*

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- <sup>1</sup> This student is not focused or specific in her opening, but she does mention the phrase that is the basis of the prompt.
- <sup>2</sup> The prompt does assign the student to "argue what Thomas Jefferson most likely meant," and this thesis statement does that quite strongly.
- <sup>3</sup> Grammatically and syntactically, this is a debatable interpretation, but the student says she can support it, so we'll wait to see.
- <sup>4</sup> This student bases much of her interpretation not only on the words and phrases themselves, but on their context, their placement in the sentence and paragraph. Context is a perfectly legitimate basis for interpretation.
- <sup>5</sup> "Pretty clear" is probably not the best word choice, but it is effective that this student pauses in her examination of the letter to remind her reader of her thesis.

They later make it even clearer. Apparently, Thomas Jefferson had been called "an enemy of religion, law, and good order." In this same sentence,<sup>6</sup> they say these charges are because Jefferson has refused to "assume the prerogatives of Jehovah and make laws to govern the kingdom of Christ." The words the Danbury Baptists Association use in their letter clearly show that they see the laws of the United States having the power to punish criminals, but that civil government had no right to meddle with religious law, the "laws that govern the kingdom of Christ."<sup>7</sup>

Jefferson's response is that he also believed that "religion is a matter which lies solely between Man and his God," that "he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship," and that "the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions."

If we compare the two letters,<sup>8</sup> we find that both the Danbury Baptist Association and Thomas Jefferson define the "legitimate powers" of government. The Danbury Baptists Association restrict this legitimate power to "punish[ing] the man who works ill to his neighbors." We can infer from this that they mean thieves, murderers, slanderers, even stalkers who frighten and harass their victims. To infer from these words that they believed the government had the "legitimate power" to require church attendance or prayer in school is impossible to support. The person who chooses to pray in private or who chooses not to pray at all is not someone who "works ill to his neighbors."

And does anyone really believe that compulsory prayer would be an effective punishment for "the man who works ill to his neighbors"?

Jefferson's words are very similar. He limits the legitimate powers of government to "actions only, and not opinions." If we're tempted to infer, then, that Jefferson would allow the government to require prayer and church attendance,<sup>10</sup> we must look earlier in this same sentence where Jefferson says that he believes "religion is a matter which lies solely between Man and his God" and that "he [man]" owes account to none other [than God]<sup>12</sup> for his faith or his worship." If a man owes an account of his worship to no one but God, then Jefferson is pretty clearly saying

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<sup>6</sup> Here again she points out the context as a means of supporting her interpretation.

<sup>7</sup> And again, she very carefully pauses to remind the reader of the significance of the passages she is quoting.

<sup>8</sup> So far, it has seemed as if the student were going to address one letter and then the next. Here she suggests that there is also going to be a more focused point-to-point comparison between the two.

<sup>9</sup> While rhetorical questions can be effective in public speaking, they are generally not advisable in persuasive writing. The student is relying on the readers' answering the question the way she wants them to.

<sup>10</sup> This is another rhetorical device, procatetipsis. Here, the student anticipates a potential objection to her point and addresses it.

<sup>11</sup> The use of brackets in a quotation is legitimate as long as the material within the brackets fairly and accurately maintains the meaning of the quotation. In this case, the student is merely taking the antecedent (man) from the previous clause to clarify the pronoun (he) in this clause.

<sup>12</sup> Here, the student is merely reminding the reader that "God" appeared in an earlier clause in this same sentence. Pointing out probable meanings based on context is a valid part of analysis and interpretation.

that it is not in the government's power to require compulsory attendance at worship or compulsory prayer.<sup>13</sup>

So, when Jefferson quotes from the First Amendment, "[Congress shall] make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," and he says that this amendment builds "a wall of separation between Church and State," it is clear that he is separating the laws of the United States from the laws of God, just as the Danbury Baptists Association were doing in their letter.

The situation that motivated the Danbury Baptists Association letter is also a clue to what they meant by "religious liberty" and what Jefferson meant by his "wall of separation." Apparently,<sup>14</sup> the Connecticut State Constitution did not guarantee religious freedom. The Danbury Baptist Association complains "our constitution of government is not specific." They tell Jefferson, "what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the state) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights." Apparently, these Baptists are in the minority in Connecticut. Apparently, they are allowed to believe what they choose and worship as they choose, but these liberties (they call them "privileges") are held to be favors granted by the state, not their basic, fundamental right.

There also seems to be some penalty inflicted on the Baptists Association for their participation in a minority religion.<sup>15</sup> In their letter, they mention "such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen." They never specify what these "acknowledgements" are, but we know that, historically, persons who did not choose to be members of the official Church of England were allowed to practice their own religion, but were also required to attend Anglican worship several times a year and were also required to pay taxes to support the Anglican Church.<sup>16</sup> In fact, toward the end of their letter, the Danbury Baptists Association calls the supporters of an official, or majority, church "those who wish to raise to wealth and importance on the poverty and subjection of the people"—the same people the Danbury Baptists Association earlier referred to as "[those] who seek after power and gain under the pretense of government and religion." We can conclude that the Danbury Baptist Association may have indeed been required to pay a tax to the majority church of Connecticut or serve that church in some way.<sup>17</sup>

As members of a minority religion, the Danbury Baptists Association desire a complete withdrawal of government from religion.<sup>18</sup> They not only want to be able to practice their religion, they do not want to be required to "acknowledge"

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<sup>13</sup> And, again, here the student restates the point in her own words to keep her readers focused on her thesis.

<sup>14</sup> "Apparently" introduces an inference. The quotations that follow provide the support for that inference.

<sup>15</sup> This is another inference, and the student does follow it with support.

<sup>16</sup> It is, of course, legitimate to bring in outside knowledge or information gained through research in support of a thesis, as long as that outside information is accurate and presented accurately and fairly.

<sup>17</sup> This conclusion is another inference, but the student has been careful always to provide the actual text on which she is basing her inferences.

<sup>18</sup> This reminds the reader of the original thesis.



the majority or official religion. Jefferson agrees. He answers them that the First Amendment builds a "wall of separation" between civil matters and religious matters. Therefore, the famous and now-controversial phrase "separation of Church and State" can only mean that the government cannot "dare [to] assume the prerogatives of Jehovah and make laws to govern the kingdom of Christ."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This essay would receive a high score on an AP exam. Whether you agree or disagree with the student's thesis, she makes that thesis clear in the first paragraph, continues to remind the reader of that thesis, provides adequate textual support, and is careful to explain the significance of that support in her own words.



**Sample free-response item two (independent):**

"Historical Revisionism" is often criticized as a dishonest technique by which some try to slant others' understanding of the past. Others argue that, as new information becomes available, and scholars reexamine already-familiar documents, our understanding of the past changes and becomes clearer and more accurate. Still others believe that no one can ever fully understand the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of people long dead; all knowledge of history is, therefore, incomplete and biased. Consider these three views on historical knowledge and then write a thoughtful and well-supported essay in which you argue for the validity of one of them. Draw on whatever knowledge you have of primary source documents in order to support your stance.

Whether you believe that "historical revisionism" is a valid process that allows each generation to reexamine and reevaluate its traditions and beliefs or that this reevaluation is nothing more than propaganda to advance a political or social agenda, it is clear that no one can ever claim to fully understand the past. Even the most honest attempts are incomplete, subjective, and biased.<sup>2</sup> Two or three people involved in the same event cannot all agree on what happened a day or two after the event, let alone expecting anyone who was not a participant to really know anything about something that happened hundreds of years ago. It is even more impossible to really know what historical persons were thinking when they did the things or write the things that made them historical.

Modern interpretations of the 1801 letter written by the Danbury Baptist Association to President Thomas Jefferson and his 1802 reply are<sup>3</sup> a perfect

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<sup>1</sup> This student has also chosen to begin her essay by repeating a part of the prompt.  
<sup>2</sup> The prompt asked the student to choose one of the three views to support. Here this student identifies her choice.  
<sup>3</sup> Here she identifies the primary source documents on which she is going to base her essay.

example. Interpretations range from the argument that Jefferson intended only to suggest that no one denomination of Christianity would be held as more official than any other to the thesis that Jefferson meant that the government of the United States should be religion-neutral or religion-free. While proponents of both arguments, and all of the positions in between, claim to be "right," neither can really know what Jefferson really meant.<sup>4</sup> All we can do is look at the words he wrote and the circumstances he wrote them under.

Even then, what we claim to know is really nothing more than interpretation and inference, and those are almost certainly going to be shaped by the beliefs, prejudices, and biases of the people who make them.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of the original letter, from the Danbury Baptist Association, written in October of 1801, is clearly that members of the Baptist denomination in Connecticut are being discriminated against, that the Connecticut Constitution does not protect religious liberty as a right. We know that they are discriminated against by the fact that, in their letter, they complain that they receive the "favor" of "religious liberty" at the price of "such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen." It is clear in their letter that the cause of the discrimination is their religion (Baptist), which makes them "a minor part of the state."<sup>6</sup> Their complaint to President Jefferson is that they want their right to be Baptists to be recognized by law, not considered a favor granted by the state. Jefferson's assurance, then, that the First Amendment of the Constitution, that Congress will "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," might be interpreted by some to mean only that one denomination would not be allowed to be supreme over any other denomination. After all, the Baptists are Christians, and it is only the differences in their Christian beliefs and practices that make them a minority.

The Baptists themselves refer to Jefferson's unwillingness to allow the government to legislate religion as his refusal to "assume the prerogatives of Jehovah and make laws to govern the kingdom of Christ." It almost makes sense for people to infer that the Baptists are limiting their idea of religious liberty to freedom of Christians to decide for themselves which denomination to join.

On the other hand, in assuring the Baptist Association that their right to worship as they chose is protected by United States law, Jefferson writes that there is a "wall of separation between Church and State." This is a very strong statement that can rightly be interpreted to mean all religions, not only Christianity. The Baptists do write that they are "uniformly on the side of religious liberty." Again, they are not saying that they support "Christian" liberty but religious liberty. The only way someone could infer from this that they meant only "Christian" liberty

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<sup>4</sup> It seems for a sentence or two that this student has lost her focus and is going to discuss all three views, but she tightens her focus again, reestablishing that she is going to discuss the third view.  
<sup>5</sup> Here is where she brings in the notion of bias, as requested in the prompt.  
<sup>6</sup> As is the case with other essays, there must be direct textual support of all interpretations and inferences.

would be to assume that there were no other religions in the United States in 1801 and 1802.

Historically, however, we know that there were Jews in America as early as 1654. The second oldest synagogue in the United States is in Philadelphia and was founded in 1740.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, Thomas Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers intended to include Jews' right to their "religious opinions." While the Baptists refer specifically to "the kingdom of Christ," Jefferson writes of "the common father and creator of man." This is a much broader reference and could include a Jewish notion of God, while the Baptists are not necessarily including Jews in their understanding of "religious liberty."<sup>8</sup>

Who can say with any certainty whether or not the Danbury Baptist Association intentionally excluded Jews from their idea or simply forgot that there were other "minor part(s) of the state" besides them? They were, after all Christians writing from a Christian perspective. It might not even ever have occurred to them that the persecution they were experiencing might have also been inflicted on others as well!<sup>9</sup>

And no one can claim to absolutely know that Jefferson meant to suggest that Jews as well as Christians of every denomination enjoyed inalienable "rights of conscience."

All we have are the documents they left behind,<sup>10</sup> and the best we can do is read them carefully and completely. We must also be very careful of placing too much trust in anyone—no matter what the interpretation—who claims to absolutely know what Jefferson or the Danbury Baptists meant in this early exchange of letters about the "separation of Church and State."

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<sup>7</sup> The prompt does not require it, but there is no harm bringing in the student's knowledge of history—as long as it is accurate, and the entire thesis does not rely on it.

<sup>8</sup> The sentence beginning "certainly" commits the same error this student's chosen view criticizes, but she redeems herself by returning to the text and an interpretation of Jefferson's words.

<sup>9</sup> While it is brief, this is the student's discussion of the role of bias suggested in the third view.

<sup>10</sup> The prompt requires and this student's introduction promises an examination of primary source documents.

### Exercise Three:

**Questions 11–15.** Read the following passage carefully before you choose your answers.

In September 1897, eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon asked her father whether there really was a Santa Claus. As is typical of children of that age, Virginia had begun doubting the existence of the Jolly Old Elf and had been told by some of her friends that Santa did not really exist. For reasons we will never know, Dr. Philip O'Hanlon did not answer his daughter's question, but advised her to write to the then-prominent New York Sun. "If you see it in the Sun," O'Hanlon told his daughter, "it's so." On September 21, 1897, Virginia's letter and an unsigned response appeared on the editorial page of the Sun. It was later learned that the famous response was the work of Francis Pharcellus Church, a veteran newsman who had been a war correspondent during the Civil War. The New York Sun was owned by Church's brother, William Church. Francis Church died in 1906. He had no children, but his famous answer to young Virginia's letter has touched the lives of children for over a century.

## Yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus

FRANCIS CHURCH

- 1 DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in *The Sun* it's so." Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?

VIRGINIA O'HANLON  
115 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET.

- 2 Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except [what] they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

- 3 Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

- 4 Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things

in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

5 You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

6 No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, may, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

### Multiple-Choice Questions 11 - 15:

11. Francis Church's use of the phrase "little minds" can best be described as

- A. sincere.
- B. ironic.
- C. literal.
- D. caustic.
- E. ambiguous.

12. As it is used in paragraph 5 (*Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain...*), the word *fancy* most nearly means

- A. ornate.
- B. dreamlike.
- C. desire.
- D. fantasy.
- E. ideal.

13. According to the editorial, the "truth" of Santa Claus's existence can best be described as

- A. idealistic.
- B. absolute.
- C. fictitious.
- D. figurative.
- E. relative.

14. A reader can infer all of the following from Church's editorial EXCEPT

- A. Francis Church was an idealist.
- B. scientific knowledge was burgeoning in the late nineteenth century.
- C. Francis Church disliked humanity.
- D. late nineteenth-century Americans were experiencing a loss of idealism.
- E. Francis Church had a strong affection for children.

15. The logical fallacy at the base of paragraphs 3 and 4 can best be described as

- A. proof based on what is not disproved.
- B. reliance on unproven hypotheses.
- C. begging the question.
- D. untrue or unproven premises.
- E. faulty analogy.

### Free-Response Question 5 (text-based):

Carefully read Virginia O'Hanlon's 1897 letter to the *New York Sun* and Francis Church's famous response. Then write a thoughtful, well-supported essay in which you argue the extent to which Church tells Virginia "the truth." Explain what Church means when he tells the child that there is a Santa Claus.

Do not merely summarize or paraphrase the letter.

### Free-Response Question 6 (independent):

Abstract terms like *love*, *truth*, and *justice* are often considered indefinable or completely open to interpretation. When writers use such abstract terms, they must define precisely what they mean, or they run the risk of being misunderstood and doubted. Choose an essay, article, or story in which the writer's point depends on his or her use of an abstract term and then write a well-reasoned essay in which you evaluate the writer's effectiveness in communicating an understanding of the abstract term and establishing his or her point.

Do not merely summarize the passage you choose or summarize the writer's point.