

Sample exam question notes for prose non-fiction

It is nearly impossible to read the Zora Neale Hurston passage, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, closely and not feel the crushing weight of poverty bearing down on the speaker (who happens to be the author). With that in mind, select a colour and colour-mark every word in this passage that connects to the idea of poverty (a key theme).

Here is an example to get you started:

There is something about **poverty** that **smells like death**.
Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry
season and **rotting around the feet**; impulses **smothered**
too long in the **fetid air** of underground caves. The soul lives
in a **sickly air**. People can be **slave-ships in shoes**.

Above are nine authorial diction choices that relate to the idea of 'poverty' from the first four sentences of this passage. See what else you can find in the rest of the passage.

As you re-read and colour-marked the passage, what else did you notice that helped you better understand it?

- Did you perceive the setting?
- What do you know about the character and her personality?
- What do you know about the character and her background?
- How does she feel about the people who surrounded her during this time in her life?

Once you feel as if you understand the passage well enough to start interpreting it, you should start fully analysing the guiding question:

How, and to what effect, does Hurston utilize figurative language to compare poverty to death?

This question helps you find your focus. You need to explore the following:

- figurative language
- comparisons of poverty to death
- ultimately, what is the effect of these authorial choices?

Note that this last point is understood, although the question does not explicitly state it. Your job is always to identify the important elements in the passage, and then to analyse their effect.

There are many literary conventions/features that fall under the larger category of 'figurative language', so your first task is to evaluate them in order to determine which will help you best answer the guiding question.

Additionally, you need to comb through the passage for moments when poverty is compared to death. You know from your colour-marking that there are many references to poverty. Now, go back and circle the ones that connect poverty to death.

For example:

There is something about poverty that smells like death.
Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry

Everything you circle will be possible supporting evidence for you to use as you answer the guiding question.

When you finish this step, see what examples of figurative language you find in each of these circled phrases. Perhaps start by looking for simile, metaphor, imagery and symbolism.

This is a passage that provides almost more evidence than you can use in one essay.

Alternative guiding questions for Prose non-fiction Paper 1

If you would like to explore a different guiding question than the one provided above, explore one of these instead in your writing:

- What is the author's tone in this passage and how does she establish it?
- Explore the symbolic diction choices about light and dark, and how they establish a theme in the passage.
- How does the author's use of syntax and punctuation help convey the tone of this passage?
- How is the mood of this passage created and what theme(s) does it support?