

AP<sup>®</sup> ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Question 1

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

In the following poem by Harryette Mullen (1953 - ), the speaker explains why they cannot be held responsible for a variety of problems, issues, or situations that the implied audience might encounter. Read the poem carefully and in a well-organized essay analyze how the relationship between the speaker and audience is impacted by the speaker’s refusal to take responsibility for what may occur in the future. Consider how Mullen uses different literary techniques—such as diction, imagery, language, and syntax—and various poetic devices to establish tone and convey theme when formulating your response.

**We Are Not Responsible**

We are not responsible for your lost or stolen relatives.  
We cannot guarantee your safety if you disobey our instructions.  
We do not endorse the causes or claims of people begging for handouts.  
We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.

*Line*  
5 Your ticket does not guarantee that we will honor your reservations.  
In order to facilitate our procedures, please limit your carrying on.  
Before taking off, please extinguish all smoldering resentments.

If you cannot understand English, you will be moved out of the way.  
In the event of a loss, you’d better look out for yourself.  
10 Your insurance was cancelled because we can no longer handle  
your frightful claims. Our handlers lost your luggage and we  
are unable to find the key to your legal case.

You were detained for interrogation because you fit the profile.  
You are not presumed to be innocent if the police  
15 have reason to suspect you are carrying a concealed wallet.  
It’s not our fault you were born wearing a gang color.  
It is not our obligation to inform you of your rights.

Step aside, please, while our officer inspects your bad attitude.  
You have no rights we are bound to respect.  
20 Please remain calm, or we can’t be held responsible  
for what happens to you.

(2002)

## AP Prompt: Study Guide

1. How does the use of the anaphora in the opening stanza—beginning each line with the word “We”—establish the confrontational relationship between speaker and audience? What are the assumptions that the speaker makes about the intended audience and how do these beliefs help establish the speaker’s tone?
2. How does Mullen’s use of the formal language of corporate disclaimers—most notably, in the airlines industry—help her make her point about injustices in society? Who or what, exactly, does the speaker represent? Who is the implied audience that might be “begging for handouts” (3) and “carrying on” (6)?
3. What is implied when the speaker tells the audience, “In the event of a loss, you’d better look out for yourself” (9)? What is ironic about the insurance being “cancelled because we can no longer handle / your frightful claims” (10-11) and the speaker’s being “unable to find the key” (12) to the legal case?
4. What is the significance of the anaphora in the first two lines of the fourth stanza that begins with the word “You”? What is the implication of the audience’s being “detained for interrogation because you fit the profile” (13)? Why is it ironic that the implied audience will not be “presumed to be innocent” (14)?
5. Why must the audience have their “bad attitude” (18) inspected? What is significant about the authority figure being described as “our officer” (18)? What threat is implied about the audience’s need to “remain calm” (19) through the process? If violence occurs, who does Mullen imply is responsible?