

2010 AP[®] ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION
FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS (Form B)

Question 2

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

The passage below is from *The Horizontal World*, Debra Marquart’s 2006 memoir about growing up in North Dakota. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the strategies Marquart uses to characterize the upper Midwest.

Line Driving west from Fargo on I–94, the freeway that
cuts through the state of North Dakota, you’ll
encounter a road so lonely, treeless, and devoid of
rises and curves in places that it will feel like one
5 long-held pedal steel guitar note. If your tires are in
proper alignment, you’ll only need to tap your
steering wheel to keep your car on a straight-ahead
path.

Now you are driving deep into the square states.
10 This is the way I recently heard a comedian describe
the column of states that holds down the center of the
country—the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma
—a region that spawns both tornadoes and
Republicans.

15 TV news anchors often hail from this part of the
world, as do the most innocent female characters in
movies and prime-time TV dramas. Being blond,
fresh-faced, and midwestern makes their descent
into ruthless behavior in places like Los Angeles
20 and New York all the more tragic.

“We are the folks presidents talk to when times
require,” Sylvia Griffith Wheeler wrote in her poem
“Earthlings.” Networks make up women to look like
us “who will not trade their bleaches, soaps for
25 anything.”

This is a region that contains both Garrison
Keillor’s Lake Wobegon¹ (“where all the women are
strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the
children are above average”) and the Coen Brothers’
30 *Fargo*,² the macabre land of murder-by-wood-
chipper. Aside from this myth making, the Midwest
is a place that’s been considered devoid of stories, a
flyover region one must endure to get to more
interesting places.

35 Despite its easy inclines and farmable plains, the
region was equally unimpressive to its earliest
assessors. In the 1820s, Edwin James, the official

chronicler of Major Stephen Long’s survey,
declared the region “a dreary plain, wholly unfit for
cultivation,” and, of course, “uninhabitable by a
40 people depending upon agriculture for subsistence.” It
was Edwin James who dubbed the area between the
Mississippi and the Rockies the Great American
Desert, an indignity from which the region has
45 struggled to recover ever since.

This is the Heartland, the place where Jefferson’s
idea of a rectangular cadastral survey, the land grid
system outlined in the Land Ordinance of 1785, found
its most perfect confluence of longitude, latitude, and
50 countryside so well behaved that it laid itself down in
neat, even squares for the surveyor’s instruments.

Soon enough, as the surveying expedition moved
west, the neatness of the grid was foiled by steep
valleys, rivers, foothills, and mountains, but here in
55 the monotonous square states, the survey subdivided
the land easily into square upon square, each
measuring six miles by six miles. What followed,
Richard Manning observed in *Grassland*,³ was a war
on roots: “The place was a mess, and it became a
60 young nation’s job to fix it with geometry,
democracy, seeds, steam, steel, and water.”

Such is the situation all of my great-grandparents
and grandparents encountered when they arrived
between the years of 1885 and 1911. They traveled to
65 the Midwest by train to what was then the end of the
line—Eureka, South Dakota. *Eureka*—from the
Greek word *heureka*, meaning “I have found it”—is
reported to have been the word that Archimedes cried
when he found a way to test the purity of Hiero’s
70 crown. My grandparents wouldn’t have known the
etymology of the word, but they would have felt it,
the anticipation, as they waited along with the other
immigrants from Russia to receive their allotments of
land.

¹ a fictitious town in Keillor’s radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*

² a 1996 film produced and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen

³ a nonfiction book about the American prairie published in 1995