



Student Performance Q&A:

2012 AP® English Language and Composition

Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP® English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Mary Trachsel of the University of Iowa. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to engage students in a multifaceted writing task that exhibits synthetic, text-based thinking and writing. Synthesis is essentially the integration of parts into a whole. This year, as in years past, the prompt specified that the “whole” of this synthesis task was to be the student’s own argument in response to the question of whether the United States Postal Service should be restructured, and if so, how. The “parts” of the task might be identified as the ideas and perspectives the student gleans from the sources and finds useful in formulating a response. Students could also draw on prior knowledge gained through observation, experience, or reading to answer this question, but they were not required to do so.

A full response to this question required students to take the following steps: (1) *critical reading* of seven sources about the past, present, and future prospects of the United States Postal Service; (2) the *critical use of selected sources* to piece together (synthesize) an understanding of the question and its implications, and to inform the construction of an original response to the question; (3) clear *attribution to the appropriate sources* for the facts, perspectives, and arguments these sources contributed to the student’s argument. Sources could function to provoke, inspire, and challenge as well as support a student’s own argument.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 5.00 out of a possible 9 points.

The relatively high mean score represents students’ success in performing the tasks specified in the prompt — using and accurately crediting material drawn from at least three of the sources to explain and substantiate an argument about what, if anything, must be done to improve the United States Postal

Service (USPS). It may also reflect the virtual absence of blank or off-topic responses to this question. These results suggest that most students understood the task demanded of them by the synthesis question and felt equipped to perform it.

Although a significant percentage of students produced adequate responses to the question, many were clearly challenged by this topic, which was unfamiliar to most of them beyond the information and arguments contained in the seven sources. Some students revealed their unfamiliarity with postal services by arguing, for instance, that the USPS should lower the costs of its services and make up for this by raising the price of stamps. Dependence on the sources for basic information about the USPS and the arguments currently circulating about its future prevented some students from reading the sources critically.

The more successful essays addressed both parts of the prompt (Should the USPS be restructured? If so, how? Or, if not, why not?) and presented an argument that surveyed the multiple sources and put them in conversation with one another. Instead of an additive handling of sources, these students engaged in genuine synthesis (e.g., “While Sources A and C maintain that . . . , Source E reminds us that . . .”). Higher-scoring essays tended to use varied and descriptive verbs (“argues,” “offers a historical perspective,” “contradicts,” etc. instead of the generic “says” or “states”) to explain how they saw the sources’ contributions to a discussion about the fate of the USPS.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Perhaps because of the unfamiliarity of the topic, few students engaged in critical analysis of the sources as interested points of view that could be talked back to. The vast majority of students accepted in a completely unquestioning mode the discourse of business and bottom-line reasoning or the discourse of nostalgia. These students tended to use the sources in an additive rather than a synthetic manner (“Source A says . . . ; Source B says . . . ; Source C says . . .”). This heavy reliance on the sources was manifest in extensive quotation and paraphrase, with little analysis or commentary provided. Finally, some of the less successful essays offered incomplete arguments, explaining that the USPS *should* be restructured in our wired age but not presenting a case for *why* or *how* this restructuring should happen.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

1. When teaching source-based argument, introduce argumentative sources as participants in a conversation about contested, unresolved questions. Before students enter into this conversation themselves, they need to figure out what people are arguing about and why. What is at stake for the various participants in the conversation? How do participants’ interests in the issue conflict and overlap?
2. Increase students’ sociological imagination about controversial topics and the sources that discuss them by teaching students to ask which groups are privileged by a particular line of argument or which parties are ignored or stereotypically presented or imagined. Teach students to ask why the issue in question matters to the various parties weighing in.
3. Direct students’ attention to what sources are *doing* rather than simply what they are *saying*. Discourage students’ use of extensive quotation, and teach them instead to identify particular words and phrases that encapsulate or characterize a source’s argument in a significant way. The synthesis task involves rhetorical analysis of the arguments presented by the sources, not just a reporting of their assertions. Help students see that the synthesis task involves analysis as well as argumentation.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze the rhetoric of a speech given by John F. Kennedy at a 1962 news conference in which Kennedy lambasted the steel industry for its increase in prices. The prompt asked students to “analyze the rhetorical strategies President Kennedy uses to achieve his purpose.” AP Readers looked for analyses that accomplished four tasks: (1) reading for comprehension of Kennedy’s rhetorical purpose; (2) identifying features of the text that illustrated elements of rhetorical strategies; (3) explaining these strategies in the context of the speech; and (4) explaining the logic by which the selected strategies work (or fail to work) to advance Kennedy’s rhetorical purpose.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 4.54 out of a possible 9 points.

Most students found the text of President Kennedy’s speech accessible, and even less successful essays usually indicated a general understanding of the purposes behind the speech: to scold and shame steel executives for a selfish act and to persuade the American people to join him in seeing this act as selfish. Most students demonstrated some understanding of the historical context of Kennedy’s speech and some awareness of his presidency. Students with rich readings of American history tended to perform better on this task than students whose historical knowledge was foggy or thin. We discerned historical fog in many students’ confusion of John F. Kennedy with his brother Robert, or with Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, or Bill Clinton. A vague sense of Kennedy’s war wounds and back problems perhaps led a few students to confuse the significance of the “handicap metaphor” with the speaker’s own confinement to a wheelchair. Very few students mentioned the rhetorical function of a presidential press conference as an occasion created by a president to call public attention to a current event or state of affairs and cast it in a particular light. Nevertheless, many students surmised that the audience for Kennedy’s speech included the public along with the steel executives.

Although they successfully read the relational dynamic among argument, speaker, and audience, most students struggled to explain clearly and precisely how this speaker-audience relationship was constructed by the language and organization of ideas in Kennedy’s speech on a particular occasion.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The weakest essays substituted the simpler task of summary for rhetorical analysis, merely explaining what Kennedy said. Slightly more successful analyses went beyond summary to list various rhetorical strategies but did not identify them clearly in the text or, more commonly, explain *how* the strategies might have helped Kennedy achieve his purpose. Many essays featured the terminology of rhetorical analysis (*ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*, *mythos*) or of stylistic analysis (*assonance*, *alliteration*, *parallel structure*) but inadequately or inaccurately identified these as strategies in the text — for example, confusing *ethos* and *pathos*, and demonstrating this confusion with inappropriate textual evidence or with a complete absence of reference to the text.

Typical midrange essays identified rhetorical strategies but did not make convincing connections between these strategies and Kennedy’s aims of identifying himself with the American people and condemning the steel industry’s actions. Other essays in the middle range acknowledged that Kennedy’s words were intended to have certain effects, but they identified these effects only vaguely and generically — for example, “to emphasize his points” or “to show he’s not just talking and really means what he says.”

The higher-scoring essays successfully identified strategies, fully elaborating on how these strategies helped Kennedy rally support from the American people by publicly shaming the steel executives. For

example, one student discussed how Kennedy worked in his speech to make the subject of rising steel prices relevant to the American public; another discussed how the “millionaire Harvard graduate” managed to identify with working-class Americans.

A vast majority of the essays focused primarily or exclusively on features of prose style, with the weakest of these fixated on the formal features (stylistic devices, logical fallacies) without acknowledging the intent behind them (Kennedy’s rhetorical purpose). A typical essay began, “President Kennedy used anaphora, emotion, and slippery slope to achieve his purpose” and then moved on — with various levels of success — to identify the location and use of what the student identified as Kennedy’s rhetorical strategies.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

1. Students need help understanding that rhetorical analysis is about seeing connections between forms and functions of language. Many students reduced rhetorical analysis to a search for tropes and figures. Although being able to recognize and appreciate formal features of language is important, students should gain a fuller understanding of rhetoric in the AP English Language and Composition course. The Question Leader for this question suggests that we view style as only one of the five elements of Classical rhetoric. The other four elements are *invention* (finding the argument, including understanding how a writer’s or speaker’s ethos, pathos, and logos work with a particular audience in a particular situation); *arrangement* (understanding how the organization of a written or spoken text influences how audiences receive it); *memory* (an element that functions very differently in a predominantly oral culture like ancient Greece and the digitized culture of today’s American high school); and *delivery* (how the message is sent and received). Although style is certainly an essential part of rhetoric, it is not the only essential part. Therefore a rhetorical analysis cannot be fully successful by considering style only.
2. A classroom focus on how texts function or perform social action should involve rhetorical reading of functional texts, which students should learn to discuss in terms of the rhetorical *action* the texts try to accomplish with particular audiences in particular settings. Advertisements, whose obvious function is to persuade consumers to buy, and political campaign speeches, whose obvious function is to convince voters to favor a candidate, are good beginning examples of functional texts for students to practice reading rhetorically. Editorials and letters to the editor, solicitation letters, and advice column responses may offer somewhat more sophisticated arguments on which students can exercise their skills of rhetorical analysis. Gradually students should be led to analyze the forms and functions of longer, subtler, and more complicated arguments — for example, documentary films, trade books that represent investigative journalism, academic research studies, and journalism that performs cultural critique.
3. Students should understand that the essence of rhetorical analysis is a clear understanding of the argument conveyed by the text. Only with this understanding firmly in place can the analysis of textual features proceed with purpose. Although students frequently pointed out how Kennedy used facts, specific language, or ideas to “develop logos,” students often did not think through the logic of Kennedy’s argument as presented by the whole of his speech; nor did they sometimes think through the logic of their own writing.
4. Avoid formulaic approaches. As Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say, I Say* demonstrates, students can be helped by explicit templates when they are learning to make new rhetorical moves. But templates should not be left to harden into rigid formulas for students to use in place of analytic thinking about unique rhetorical texts serving unique rhetorical purposes. Numerous Readers observed identical patterns in essays from a single school. Students used these verbal formulas to reduce the analytic thinking to a fill-in-the-blank task:

Paragraph 1: JFK (or whatever speaker or writer might be on the test), in _____, argues _____ . He asserts _____. His purpose is _____. He establishes a(n) (in)formal relationship with his audience of _____.

Paragraph 2: JFK uses tone to _____.

This formulaic approach serves to remind students of the basic parts of any rhetorical situation they may analyze: text, claims, purpose, audience, and language choices. But once students have internalized this rhetorical model, they should be able to look past the parts to comprehend the whole: What was Kennedy trying to *do* in this speech? How did he want his words to affect his audiences (steel executives and the American people at large)? How can you see, in the text and in the information provided about its delivery, how Kennedy wanted his audience to think or act after hearing his speech? A habit of asking such rhetorical questions is better preparation for the analysis question than a memorized fill-in-the-blank response.

5. Introduce students to Classical terminology (if at all) only after they have gained a practical understanding of the concepts represented by the terms. Students need to learn that rhetoric is a set of practices, not a set of terms.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to make an argument about the relationship between certainty and doubt. The prompt introduced the topic by presenting short quotations from the works of two 20th-century philosophers. One excerpt celebrates certainty, and the other champions doubt. The question that follows these short quotations does not specifically refer back to either or both of the quotations, thus giving the student permission to launch into any number of legitimate discussions of the relationship between certainty and doubt.

The first passage, from William Lyon Phelps, presents “certainty” in terms of inner motivation, confidence, and determination informed by “powerful beliefs.” The passage from Bertrand Russell, however, situates doubt in the context of opinions and belief systems that reside primarily within the culture, of which the individual is only a part. The open-endedness of the prompt and the dilemma presented by the somewhat mismatched quotations were, however, felicitous for many students. They could legitimately and successfully respond to the prompt from a multiplicity of angles, finding various points of entry into an argument about the relationship between certainty and doubt. They could, for instance, define certainty and doubt as virtues or vices, as attitudes, or as intellectual practices. They could observe certainty or doubt, or both, in their own lives or in the world around them, as well as in texts they had seen, heard, or read. They could consider how certainty or doubt operated in the lives of historical figures or present-day celebrities.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.43 out of a possible 9 points.

This was the lowest scoring of the three questions, an indication that students were challenged by the open-ended prompt’s demands on their powers of invention. A few students attempted to make this question fit the form of previous years’ questions — for instance, by beginning with an assertion of agreement, disagreement, or qualification of one of the quoted statements. Many students, however, appeared to be thinking through the question of how certainty or doubt might be related to one another as they wrote, so even though this question generally scored lower than the other two, we were heartened by most students’ understanding of the prompt and their ability to begin building responses to the question it

asked them to consider. In short, Readers found that most students comprehended the prompt and attempted the task it asked of them.

Successful essays focused clearly on the relationship between certainty and doubt. They might have argued for the virtues of one over the other, but they generally explored the two concepts, either as constituting an irreconcilable polarity or as being organically interrelated. The best essays impressed Readers with the range of historical and cultural knowledge marshaled to support a nuanced, logical argument. Picasso's ego, Van Gogh's doubt, St. Thomas Aquinas' "naïve" assumption about the existence of God, Descartes' reduction of that assumption to certainty about his own existence but inability to be certain about anything else, Jeremy Bentham's "hedonistic calculus," the trophy kid generation, and the ill-fated hubristic venture of *Into the Wild* all came to the support of well-developed arguments, as did some touching personal narratives about overcoming cancer and the placebo effect for patients of Parkinson's disease.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Midrange essays sometimes offered the same kinds of evidence and examples that appeared in support of the central arguments of high-scoring essays, but they tended to use that evidence in a more plodding, less fully developed way. The arguments of these essays were adequately structured, often following the five-paragraph paradigm of introduction, three appropriate examples, and a conclusion. Although the examples used might be appropriate and supportive of the writer's argument, the arguments themselves were often simplistic, and the multiple examples tended merely to reinforce the same point (e.g., "The superiority of certainty over doubt can be seen in baseball, *The Great Gatsby*, and my own life") rather than guide the development of a thoughtful argument from the opening question to a well-considered response. The arguments of these essays tended to be less developed and less precise than the arguments in more effective essays, often drawing broad-stroke examples from obvious spheres of personal, historical, and cultural experience.

Lower-scoring essays revealed a range of deficiencies, from faulty logic and simplistic arguments, to inadequate control of language, to inadequately developed or inappropriately applied evidence. The least successful fell into mere assertion of a position with little or no supporting evidence, usually, but not exclusively, taking a position embodying a "little engine that could" faith in the power of self-confidence to produce success in such areas as sports, the classroom, marriage, business, and spiritual salvation.

The argument prompt, with its focus on abstract concepts and relationships, made literary examples somewhat more useful this year than they were in response to last year's question about the applicability in the 21st century of Thomas Paine's description of America. Literary examples used this year were most successful when students performed a close analysis of the literary text, explaining clearly how the text introduced a relevant perspective on the relationship of certainty and doubt or provided a testimonial to the value of one or the other. Less successful efforts to use literary texts tended to offer interpretations of novels or short stories or dramas as works that simply expressed a position about certainty and doubt that the student endorsed (*The Scarlet Letter* proves that the certainty of Hester's knowledge about Dimsdale's paternity is a more powerful force than her community's doubts about her character).

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

1. Encourage students to explore and discuss the world beyond their comfort zones of peer, family, community, and mass culture. Students need opportunities to discover and develop their own critical positions through reading, listening to, and carefully considering the positions of others, and then discussing these positions and their own in conversations with their peers, instructors, and fellow citizens of their nation and the world.

2. Teachers can help students develop critical argument skills by asking challenging questions. Students need to practice writing and speaking for skeptical audiences who demand to see the evidence and understand the rationale behind students' claims. For instance, a question like "How do you know this is true?" asks students to reflect on the quality of their evidence or the need for a justification. A question that begins, "But what would an unemployed factory worker think about ... ?" asks them to consider a question from perspectives other than their own.
3. Students need to be able to identify forms and functions of *claims*, *appeals*, *supporting evidence*, *rationales*, and *explanation* in the texts they read and write. Teachers can point out to students that the kind of rhetorical analysis they are learning to perform on other people's texts is the same kind of analysis their own arguments are subject to in academic settings such as the AP English Language and Composition Exam.