



Student Performance Q&A:

2002 AP[®] English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Reader regarding the 2002 free-response questions for AP English Language and Composition. *They are intended to assist AP readers as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for the AP Exams.* They give an overview of each question and its performance, 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 included. Readers are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was intended by the question?

This question asked students to analyze the rhetorical strategies that President Lincoln used in his Second Inaugural Address and to explain how the strategies helped him to achieve his purpose. Students were supposed to examine the speech, ferret out its underlying beliefs and ideas, and explain the methods that Lincoln used to make these beliefs and ideas appeal to his audience.

How well did students perform?

Students had little difficulty in understanding Lincoln's prose. The openness of the prompt produced responses that examined a greater variety of techniques than is usually the case, and the better students rose to the challenge of explaining the relationship among these techniques and their effect upon the speech as a whole. Middle-range responses relied more heavily upon paraphrase, and although they often cited such specific strategies as parallel structure, anaphora, asyndeton, irony, personification, and allusion, they did not demonstrate a full understanding of their effect. Weaker papers relied almost entirely upon paraphrase or summary, or merely listed devices. The weakest papers offered general comments about the Civil War, Lincoln, and slavery, demonstrating little comprehension of Lincoln's prose, his rhetorical strategies, or the prompt.

What were common errors or omissions?

The most common error seemed to be misunderstanding what the question intended by the word "analyze." Many students interpreted analysis as a command to go on a treasure hunt searching for examples of specific rhetorical terms without considering how these strategies are used to achieve the author's purpose or their relationship to each other or the work as a whole. This was a problem for students as they responded to both Questions 1 and 2. They focused too much on displaying that they had memorized definitions of rhetorical and literary terms and seemed to forget that readers (their intended audience) were already familiar with the general definitions of such terms. Students frequently omitted the most important part of analysis: how the various parts relate and combine to create an overall effect.

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

The AP course in English Language and Composition should emphasize close reading of complex texts, critical thinking, and writing. It is not a course in advanced logic and rhetoric, in the appreciation of literature, or in the memorization and cataloguing of rhetorical or literary terms. Therefore, teachers should focus more on teaching the elements of argument and persuasion that help students examine and articulate their positions and those of others: claims, evidence, warrants, and rhetorical appeals. If teachers focus more on helping students understand how these basic elements of rhetoric work in combination within a given text and rhetorical situation, students will be better prepared for analysis. The primary focus of the analysis we undertake in our classroom discussions should be to make the implicit explicit and to help students understand what they read in greater depth; consequently, most students would be better served by our use of a more holistic approach. We should begin by examining and discussing a text's major ideas and its intended purpose before moving on to analyze its pivotal rhetorical moves.

Question 2

What was intended by the question?

Question 2 asked students to examine a passage taken from Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being* and to explain how Woolf uses language to convey the lasting significance of these moments from her past. It required students to demonstrate an ability to analyze non-fiction prose and to examine how language, in its broadest and most comprehensive sense, can be used to establish value. This passage is, in essence, a subtle argument that convinces its audience of the value of childhood experiences in shaping individual character and life choices.

How well did students perform?

Students were less successful in their responses to this question than in the other two. While the openness of the prompt allowed students a variety of approaches, far too many interpreted "language" in its most limited sense, discussing parts of speech when their interests would have been better served by focusing upon such aspects of language as nuance and structure. Students were often unable to explain the implications of Woolf's language and the way in which it provided special resonance for her youthful experiences. The most successful recognized that Woolf was writing about far more than summers and fishing and that she was, indeed, offering a partial explanation of how writers construct reality. They discussed the importance of such elements as analogy, imagery, pacing, metaphor, and tone with careful explanations of how they served Woolf's larger purpose. Usually, such students comprehended Woolf's seed metaphor and explained its great significance to the passage as a whole. Papers in the middle range seemed to focus upon the boating experience and its figurative language, but they were unable to gather these various parts to demonstrate the greater significance of the boating incident and its effect upon Woolf's later life. Lower-range papers paraphrased, summarized, misread, or listed; some of the least successful ones told personal stories about their own summers or parents.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students seem to have great difficulty in drawing inferences and in making implicit connections. Many failed to understand what Woolf implies about the role of her childhood experience in shaping her life as an adult. For example, they identified the seed metaphor without analyzing its significance, and this omission left them with a very limited understanding of the passage and of Woolf's overall purpose. As they did last year with the question on Mary Oliver's "Owls," many students also invented allegory and symbol where none existed, inferring much more than the passage implied.

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

We need to incorporate more non-fiction prose that relies upon nuance and insinuation into our syllabi and help students learn how to read such prose with an ear for its implications and embedded connections. We need to teach students how to interrogate the validity of the inferences they draw from such texts and to recognize that prose analysis requires that they explain how a given text leads them to make suppositions.

Question 3

What was intended by the question?

This prompt required that students support, qualify, or dispute a claim or claims made in an excerpt from Milan Kundera’s book, *Testaments Betrayed*. It asked them to explore a perspective on an issue close to their own lives and to compose a written argument that established their own position on this issue.

How well did students perform?

The open-ended prompt did not specify which claim nor did it insist on anything more specific than “appropriate evidence.” This latitude seemed to help the more capable writers who took a variety of approaches, but the Question Leader felt that it was less empowering for less capable writers.

Most readers agreed that this is one of the most successful argument questions of recent years. The topic seemed to be particularly accessible and interesting to students of all levels, and it produced the highest mean score of the three questions. Stronger papers tended to consider the public and private worlds that Kundera constructs as a false binary that doesn’t take into account the slippage between the two worlds, and many were able to discuss the difficulty that comes when people try to balance the public and private. Many upper-half papers connected the issue of privacy with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and discussed the necessity to sacrifice private freedom in order to gain public safety. These students drew their evidence from a variety of sources: President Nixon, Princess Diana, Elvis Presley, President Kennedy, President Bush, ENRON, reality TV, and the Catholic priesthood scandal. They frequently used the President Clinton-Monica Lewinsky example on both sides of the argument about the importance of separating the public and private.

Middle-range papers were less able to muster a position and provide compelling evidence. They frequently seemed to be going through the motions of argumentation without providing the logos and pathos of the superior papers. The weaker responses provided paraphrases or a very thin argument, frequently forgetting the importance of providing evidence. A few decided to ignore the prompt and spent their time criticizing Prochaska’s behavior.

What were common errors or omissions?

Less successful students seemed to overlook the importance of evidence and/or appealing to their audience. They frequently relied upon warrants that readers had some difficulty accepting. Such inappropriate choices seem to indicate that many students forget to employ rhetorical techniques in the service of their own writing; they often omitted some of the basics of argumentation, particularly the need to establish an ethos that is appropriate for their audience and purpose.

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

In “Corn-Pone Opinions,” Mark Twain complains that “we do not think, we only imitate.” This criticism is certainly true of many students—even though good writing requires good thinking rather than imitation. As I mentioned last year, programmatic methods discourage such thought, teaching students to imitate by substituting form for substance. In order to avoid this, we must provide students with a greater variety of opportunities to examine their thinking and to contrast their ideas with the ideas of others. We must also help students escape the quagmire of what they perceive as our expectations to find a place where they can think and speak with original voices. By teaching argumentation and paying particular attention to the ways in which authors consider the interplay among claim, evidence, warrant, and audience, we can empower students to write their own thoughtful and effective essays. Such writing is never formulaic or derivative.