



Student Performance Q&A:

2002 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Reader about the 2002 free-response questions for AP United States History. *They are intended to assist AP workshop consultants 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?

The question required the student to identify and discuss in analytic fashion the various reform movements represented by the documents and evaluate whether these reform movements aimed to expand “democratic ideals.” The question did not require a definition of democratic ideals.

How well did students perform?

Students did a better job of identifying, than of discussing the reform movements that were represented by the documents. Most students did not attempt any definition of “democratic ideals,” nor did most of them qualify the degree to which individual reform movements expanded such ideals. Very few students focused on whether the reform movements sought to expand “democratic ideals,” as opposed to offering a judgment as to whether democratic ideals were actually expanded as a result of the reforms.

What were common errors or omissions?

Common errors included inappropriate and/or inaccurate interpretations of Documents D (Morse), F (Brook Farm), and G (Brownson). Students frequently convoluted the meaning of Document D (Morse) in an effort to present it as reflecting an effort to “democratize” the immigrant experience; they also frequently failed to identify anti-Catholicism as an underlying fear expressed by Morse. Document G (Brownson) was frequently misunderstood (if they did not avoid altogether).

In a more general sense, students frequently omitted discussion of the connections between the reform movements represented by the documents and democratic ideals, respectively.

There was a notable absence of outside information in students’ responses.

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?

Students should be reminded that the purpose of the DBQ is to engender analysis of documents. It should not be constructed as a narrative that connects the various documents together. Students should start with a clear thesis statement, and develop that thesis throughout the essay. Finally, students should be urged to discuss the documents in connection with one another, whenever possible, rather than in discrete paragraphs (the proverbial “laundry list” approach).

Question 2

What was intended by the question?

The question asks students to assess the impact of religion over time in two geographical areas of colonial society.

How well did students perform?

While there were a number of excellent essays, students were ill-prepared for a colonial question that required examination of “geographical areas.”

What were common errors or omissions?

Some essays lacked a basic thesis statement. A large number of students who wrote on the Chesapeake discussed economic factors rather than religious. The most common error in this question was confusion about geographic areas. Students could not identify the Chesapeake or the Middle Atlantic colonies. Many students, for example, placed Rhode Island in the Chesapeake and Pennsylvania in New England.

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?

Students should be encouraged to read the question carefully and respond to it as directly as possible. This question required students to be accurate in terms of locating colonies and selecting their supporting facts. All too often, students had information but were unable to apply them accurately to specific geographical areas.

Question 3

What was intended by the question?

The question tested the student’s understanding of the roles played by the first three presidents in translating the new Constitution into a stable, working government. The focus was to be specifically on actions taken to contribute to stability and not just a general summary of political activities. In other words, what did each president accomplish to insure the government’s viability?

How well did students perform?

Students performed poorly on this question. Students knew some basic information on political activities that took place under individual presidents, they but couldn’t link those points to how those activities contributed to the stability of the government.

What were common errors or omissions?

Most students associated various episodes with the correct presidents, but often presented them in laundry list format with minimal discussion that failed to link developments to stability, or failed to make clear just how achievements — i.e., Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase — contributed specifically to stability. There was confusion in identifying federalists and anti-federalists and much misunderstanding of the Alien and Sedition Acts. Better students noted that the Alien and Sedition Acts and the Embargo Act could be seen as destabilizing.

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?

Students must reflect on what the question is asking, and above all, make certain that they have tied the information being given to the specific objectives of the questions. The opening paragraph should demonstrate that they understand the questions and the conclusion should pull their information together and restate how it DIRECTLY addresses the question.

Question 4

What was intended by the question?

The question intended to elicit information regarding United States foreign policy after WWI and WWII, which would indicate whether the student understood not only what occurred within the two time periods but also how the two postwar periods compared with each other.

How well did students perform?

Overall, student responses to this question were very good. Even the weakest papers tended to have a thesis. Generally, the quality of the response was determined by the weight of the accurate, relevant supporting information and the effectiveness of the analysis.

The best essays contained a clear, well-developed thesis which compared/contrasted U.S. foreign policy after WWI and WWII. More often than not, students knew far more about U.S. foreign policy between 1945-1950 than they did about the post-WWI period. Although treatment of the two periods was not necessarily balanced, the superior papers addressed both with substantial attention. As always, papers that were well-organized, soundly structured and well-written resulted in better scores.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students had limited knowledge of U.S. foreign policy between 1919 and 1928. This led to many papers that mentioned U.S. isolationism and/or alluded to economic policy during this period with little else being offered for support. Many students did not know what the Dawes Plan was and equated isolation with neutrality. The most common students made was relying on supporting information from outside the period instead of addressing the years 1919–1928 and 1945–1950.

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?

It is essential that students receive a balance of social, economic, political and diplomatic history in their AP courses to effectively address any question that they might be called on to answer. Using alternate texts and other materials to supplement the standard text is highly desirable. In addition, teaching students that they must answer the question that is asked (rather than the one they may have wanted to be asked) is crucial.

Question 5

What was intended by the question?

The question asked students to connect the activities of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to the failure of Reconstruction. The question tests students' knowledge of both the Civil Rights movement and Reconstruction, and requires them to analyze the linkage between the two topics. Because the question asks students to link the Civil Rights movement with the failures of Reconstruction, the better answers included discussion of both topics and demonstrated the relationship between them. Essays should be framed in terms of the failures of Reconstruction rather than a description of the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s.

How well did students perform?

About 50 percent of the students chose this question, and it was clear that many of the students had good working knowledge of both topics. The broadness of the question made it easier for students to marshal some factual knowledge of the topics. The better essays clearly linked the two topics, analyzed the relationship, and provided substantial, accurate historical information to support an argument. Top essays were both analytical and substantive.

The weaknesses in students' essays centered on their inability to link the two topics effectively. In addition, students focused more on one part of the question than the other (more on the Civil Rights movement than on the era of Reconstruction). Students also tended to treat both topics monolithically. For example, essays sometimes failed to make chronological distinctions between events affecting African American during Reconstruction and their consequences later during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

What were common errors or omissions?

Black Codes were used interchangeably with Jim Crow, and very few students discussed the grandfather clause. Students had a tendency to overstate and dramatize the accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement and gave little attention to its limitations or failures. Discussion of the Civil Rights movement tended to be weak in chronology.

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?

Students need sound historical background on individual topics but also need to draw connections between historical eras and topics. The more students are asked to analyze historical developments and recognize change over time, the better prepared they will be to argue their own interpretations supported by relevant historical information.