



Student Performance Q&A:

2004 AP[®] Spanish Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2004 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Language were written by the Chief Reader, Rita Goldberg of St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. 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: Paragraph Completion and Fill-Ins

What was the intent of this question?

This section tests discrete language items in context and centers on specific aspects of usage. The responses consist of only a word or two and must be completely accurate in order to be correct. Part A is a passage with 10 blanks that are to be filled in with a single word that is an appropriate form of the base word; this year the section consisted of a paragraph about the arrival of a visitor at an acquaintance's apartment. The items included several verb tenses, noun/adjective agreements, a command, an adverb, and a definite article. Part B contains 10 separate sentences that are to be completed with a form of the verb given in parentheses. This year's items included several subjunctives, an infinitive after *poder*, a gerund, two imperfects, and a present tense.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this year's Standard Group* was 9.8 out of a possible 20 points, a little higher than both last year and 2002. The mean score for the Total Group was 10.4. This was almost a whole point lower than last year and 0.3 lower than in 2002. Answers to the fill-ins must be very precise, and there were few perfect scores; but there were also few extremely low scores, that is, those in the 0 to 3 range.

*The Standard Group does not include students who speak the language at home or who have lived for more than two months in a country where Spanish is the native language. Decisions on cut-off scores are based on this group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The fill-ins are quite challenging because of the requirement that the entire answer be correct in order for credit to be received. The most frequent errors found were in spelling and the use of accents (as in Number 12, which required an accent on *veía*, and Number 16, where an accent was needed on *oír*) and in the subjunctive (e.g., Numbers 3, 13, 14, and 20). Some students did not know how to form the command required for Number 10, and some who did nevertheless accented the word incorrectly or used no accent at all. Compound tenses of the subjunctive (as in Numbers 3 and 13) were also difficult for some, and quite a few students missed the infinitives required for Numbers 8 and 16. Another problem was the gerund for the *venir* + gerund construction that was required in Number 19. An issue in Number 15 was *se*, which some students did not place correctly in their answer and which a few did not even recognize as a pronoun. Finally, a number of students wrote more than one answer for an item (in these cases, all of the answers must be correct or the item is marked wrong), and some changed the verb in Number 16, writing *escuchar* instead of *oír*.

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?

It may be helpful to divide the following suggestions into two main categories: the exam itself and language pointers.

The Exam

- For items in the passage, only one word may be written.
- More than one word may be necessary in the 10 fill-in sentences. This could mean a compound tense of the verb provided (*llegar* > *hemos llegado*) or a reflexive construction (*terminarse* > *se termine*).
- Changing an infinitive or a verb in a simple tense to a progressive construction (*escribir* > *estaban escribiendo*) or periphrastic construction with an infinitive (*hablar* > *vamos a hablar*) is not allowed.
- Accents must be written correctly. Accents over consonants, two accents in a word, and unclear placement of the accent (as between two vowels) are all incorrect. Words with missing accents are also incorrect.
- The vocabulary provided should not be changed. In this year's Number 16, it was not acceptable to write *escuchar* instead of *oír*.
- Even if no change is required in a word, the word must be written in the blank. Writing "No cambia" or "No change" is not acceptable. Some students lost credit for Number 16 because of this error.
- If more than one response is written in the blank, they must all be correct in order to receive credit.
- Students should read each item carefully in order to understand the context. In the paragraph completion, they should read the entire paragraph before starting to write their answers. Students should also allow time to check their work in order to correct careless spelling or grammatical errors.

Language Pointers

Practice in the following language areas would be helpful:

- Accents and spelling changes
- Identifying the gender of nouns and forming the masculine and feminine plurals
- Noun/adjective and subject/verb agreements
- Verb conjugations
- Use of the subjunctive
- Sequence of tenses

Question 2: Composition

What was the intent of this question?

This section of the exam tests students' ability to write an essay of at least 200 words on a given topic. This year's Question 2 asked students to explain their position on who in a society should be responsible for the welfare of the citizens: the government or the individual. The topic was more intellectually challenging than some from previous years, but it was also more closely aligned with college expectations.

How well did students perform on this question?

This year the mean score for the Standard Group was 4.1 out of a possible nine points; the mean score for the Total Group was 4.6. In 2003 the mean scores were somewhat higher for both groups: 4.4 for the Standard Group and 4.9 for the Total Group. In 2002 the results were 4.3 for the Standard Group and 5.0 for the Total Group. Although the results do not show large variations from year to year, it is hoped that they are not indicative of a downward trend.

The total mean scores for writing were 14.0 out of a possible 29 points for the Standard Group and 15.0 for the Total Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The topic this year required a certain intellectual maturity, and some students had to reach in order to find the concepts and vocabulary that were necessary for expressing them. Nevertheless, this kind of prompt is very much in line with the type of essays that students write in the equivalent college course.

The more common errors this year include the following:

- Lack of an effective introduction or thesis statement
- Restating the topic without developing the ideas adequately
- Poor organization
- Use of informal, oral language instead of a more formal writing style
- Narrow range of vocabulary and use of very basic language structures only
- Limited use of appropriate transitions between paragraphs and ideas

- Excessive repetition of ideas, vocabulary, and structures
- Presence of many grammar, spelling, and vocabulary errors
- Extensive interference from another language; use of many anglicisms

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?

Students who are prepared for the exam and have a sense of what a 200-word essay looks like need not spend time counting words. On the other hand, some students seem to think that they have to fill the entire exam booklet, and they write inordinately long essays, many of which are poorly organized and developed. There is nothing to be gained by writing an extremely long essay.

Students should consider the time constraints of the exam; they should take five minutes to think about what they will write and perhaps prepare an outline, and they should leave sufficient time at the end to review and edit what they have written. This approach favors good organization. It may also help avoid orality, a characteristic of essays in which students write much as they speak, with all of the repetitions, run-on sentences, and colloquial language typical of oral communication.

For students to write good essays they need extensive practice as well as solid experience with reading well-written prose in Spanish. They can also benefit from learning how to evaluate their own writing and that of others. The materials available on AP Central[®] (apcentral.collegeboard.com) can be very helpful in this regard since they include essay prompts from previous years, scoring guidelines, actual student essays, and an explanation of the scores that were received.

As part of essay writing practice, it is a good idea to help students learn how to write effective introductions and conclusions. The introduction should contain a thesis and it should not merely repeat the prompt. A good conclusion will revisit the topic in general, although it is not necessary to mention each point again, particularly in the short essays required for the AP Exam. While a routine conclusion is boring, a strong conclusion gives an essay a sense of completeness and leaves Readers with a final impression. For some students, the standard five-paragraph essay works well. However, this type of essay is not a requirement for the AP Spanish Language Exam.

When rereading their essays, students should check to be sure that they have not wandered from the topic. The best essays are very focused and often show some creativity. Many students are inclined to play it safe by telling the Reader what they think the Reader wants to hear, but this approach does not necessarily lead to a successful essay. If they wish, students can certainly allow their own opinions and personality to come through, although their comments must always be relevant to the topic.

Teachers can help students achieve an appropriate style by giving them lists of words and expressions to use in writing, particularly transitional phrases. It is also important to practice using these expressions in the writing of actual essays. In addition, students should learn to vary the vocabulary and structures in their compositions. An exercise that has proven to be effective with some students is to underline certain words and phrases in an essay and ask the students to provide synonyms or alternative ways of expressing the concept.

Spelling (including accents), vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation are all important in essay writing and should all be reviewed thoroughly during the course. Content and organization are, of course, fundamental. Some teachers develop checklists for students along with individualized information about areas on which students should concentrate when reviewing their work.

Since each year there are a few students who write about the instructions instead of the prompt,

teachers should discuss with them how the prompt is set up on the page and make sure they see an actual exam. There are several examples on AP Central.

Question 3: Picture Sequence

What was the intent of this question?

This part of the exam is designed to elicit a narration of the story suggested by a series of six drawings. Students have two minutes in which to demonstrate their oral ability by telling the story as they interpret it. They are expected to use a variety of structures and vocabulary; fluency and pronunciation are also considered.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this year's Standard Group was 4.8 out of a possible nine points and 6.7 for the Total Group. These results compare favorably with those for 2003, when the mean score for the Standard Group was 4.5 and 6.4 for the Total Group. The story about a visit to the supermarket seemed quite accessible and, for the most part, students were able to deal with the vocabulary. Although some seemed unclear about how the story ended, the task is for students to tell the story as they see it. For this reason, misinterpretations are not considered when determining the score.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A number of students told the story very quickly and superficially. Since the goal is to tell the story as fully as possible within the allotted two minutes, one point is deducted from narrations that last less than one minute. On the other hand, no points are deducted from the scores of students who fill the whole time with good detail and fluency but do not complete the story.

Some students went from picture to picture describing each and even saying *En el primer dibujo*, *En el segundo dibujo*, and so on. These students lacked effective storytelling resources and were usually unable to produce an adequate variety of structures and vocabulary.

Students who earned lower scores often showed an inability to circumlocute and got stuck in their narration when trying to produce an appropriate vocabulary word.

In some cases, description prevailed over narration, especially with students who lacked vocabulary that could help them link the frames or even the sentences and concepts.

Other problems included the use of choppy, hesitant speech and the presence of so many errors in vocabulary and structure that comprehension was affected. Poor pronunciation also affected the score adversely.

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?

Although storytelling is a familiar aspect of human communication, it is extremely important that students practice this part of the exam, if possible in the same physical location and with the same equipment they will have on the day of the exam. They need not record each time they practice, but the course should include frequent storytelling with or without a sequence of six pictures. When students are unfamiliar with this part of the exam, as does happen, their success on this section is jeopardized.

Prior to the exam, teachers should work with school authorities and the proctor to ensure that there will be no distracting noises while students are recording. Students should also be placed far enough apart for them not to be distracted by hearing each other or feel tempted to cheat. It is also a good idea for the teacher and the proctor to review together the pages on the speaking section in the *Coordinator's Manual*.

Some students stop and start their machines while recording, possibly in order to think. This practice is not allowed and could result in a suspected security violation.

Students should practice using the allotted time to the fullest. It is important that they have a sense of how long two minutes is.

When students begin recording after the two-minute preparation time, some of them start out with several perfect sentences but then quickly run out of steam and bog down in their telling of the rest of the story. Students should use the two minutes prior to recording to think about all of the drawings.

Practicing several kinds of oral activities during the course can help students do well on both parts of the speaking section. Oral presentations and oral narration in more contexts than just the AP Exam provide excellent practice in extended discourse and help students think in the presentational mode that is required for the picture sequence narration.

There are several other ways teachers can help students do well on this section. Teachers can:

- provide many opportunities for students to hear spoken Spanish, particularly the narration or longer utterances found in feature films, documentaries, speeches, and interviews;
- practice circumlocution and paraphrasing throughout the year so that students use appropriate strategies when more precise vocabulary does not come to mind;
- give students a list of linking words and expressions and practice them; and
- review basic vocabulary and do activities intended to broaden students' vocabulary.

Question 4: Directed Responses

What was the intent of this question?

The five questions in this section provide a simulated conversation on a single topic, which this year was free-time activities. In this section, the questions become progressively more complex in terms of content and language, and the challenge for students increases with each question. The questions usually include a command, an opinion to be explained or defended, and a hypothetical situation requiring a subjunctive.

How well did students perform on this question?

The topic was familiar to students and the questions were all relatively easy for them to understand, except for the last, which was more difficult. The mean scores were the highest they have been in several years: 11.3 out of a possible 20 points for the Standard Group and 15.1 for the Total Group. Scores for the Standard Group were 10.7 in both 2002 and 2003. Scores for the Total Group were 14.1 in 2003 and 14.5 in 2002.

The total mean scores for speaking were 16.1 out of a possible 29 points for the Standard Group and 21.9 for the Total Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students understood most of the questions but had some difficulty with Number 5, which was complex in conceptual as well as linguistic terms.

Some students had trouble with the commands required in Number 3, where they had to convince a friend. They also lacked strategies that would have helped them avoid having to use a command.

Additional problems and errors noted included the following:

- Using only a small portion of the 20 seconds available
- Failing to answer the questions thoroughly
- Labored, halting expression
- Getting stuck because of limited vocabulary and the inability to circumlocute
- Poor pronunciation
- Making many errors in basic structures (e.g., verb conjugations, agreements, and possessives)

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?

As with the picture sequence, it is important that students have the opportunity not only to practice this section but also to practice with the equipment that will be used on the day of the exam. A run-through of the instructions with the proctor is also advisable. Be sure the proctor understands that the master CD should not be stopped after each question and that students should be instructed not to stop their recordings once they have started to speak. In other words, student recording should be initiated at the beginning of the Directed Responses section and not stopped until the very end of the exam; the master recording explicitly indicates these starting and stopping points. When practicing the directed responses during the course, some teachers avoid having to listen to the questions by asking students to stop and start their recordings. This is not a good idea because students will learn the pattern and may apply it instinctively during the exam, which may lead to an investigation of suspected security violations.

Even if students are not sure how to respond to a question, they should say something relevant no matter how brief because they may receive some credit. Silence or a series of “ums” will result in a score of 0 for the question.

Twenty seconds is a very short time, but initially it may feel very long to students. It is wise for them to practice filling the time. Teachers can use a timer and have students practice directed response activities in class without necessarily recording them.

During the course, provide many situations, like debates and interviews, that require impromptu but thoughtful responses in Spanish.

Expose students to a variety of voices, speakers, and accents. This will help them deal with any unfamiliar voices or accents they hear on the exam. Even if there is no local radio or TV in Spanish, the Internet offers many free resources, including radio and a large variety of video materials. Additionally, several Spanish-language TV channels can be viewed over the Internet.

Teachers can also help improve performance on this section by working with students to master verbs and vocabulary beyond the most basic level. Practice with circumlocution is also recommended.