



Student Performance Q&A:

2004 AP[®] Spanish Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2004 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Literature 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: Poetry Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

The poetry question assesses students' ability to write an essay analyzing how a given theme is treated in a particular poem. This year's poem was "Millionarios," by the Uruguayan poet Juana de Ibarbourou. The question asked for an analysis of how youth is celebrated in the poem and of the poetic language and devices used to present this theme.

How well did students perform on this question?

Each of the three literature questions counts for 20 percent of the exam, and on each essay, content counts for 70 percent and language for 30 percent. For this year's Question 1, the content mean score was 5.0 out of a possible nine points and the language mean score was 3.3 out of a possible five points. This question had the highest mean scores of the three questions on the exam, and its mean scores were the highest they have been in recent years. These results indicate both the accessibility of the poem and students' ability to write well about it.

Essays in the high range were well developed and provided a clear and thorough analysis of how youth is celebrated in the poem and of the poetic devices used. Mid-range essays showed that students understood and addressed the question and the theme, but these essays tended to be less well developed and contained significant errors. Weaker essays often lacked focus, presented unsupported or vague statements, and tended to be more descriptive than analytic.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Two principal categories of errors were apparent: those related to the specific requirements of the question and those related to essay writing in general. Language usage had its own set of

concerns. Errors related to this year's question included:

- misunderstanding the poem (e.g., thinking that it is about money);
- discussing the poem in general terms without focusing on the question;
- writing an essentially descriptive essay;
- presenting vague or unsupported statements about the theme, the poetic devices in the poem, or even the author;
- simply listing or describing the poetic language and devices without linking them to the theme of the poem;
- not including specific textual references; and
- failing to discuss how the form relates to the content, not recognizing that the poem is a sonnet, or not discussing what the form has to do with the development of the poem.

General issues related to essay writing included:

- lack of a thesis statement or introduction;
- poor organization; and
- a conclusion that merely repeated the introduction or was only a simplistic summary of the preceding paragraphs.

Among the most common language problems were frequent grammar and vocabulary errors and a lack of control of the conventions of the written language. Punctuation, spelling, and accents all count.

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?

In the poetry question, although the text is always unfamiliar, students have the advantage of having it before them. Teachers can help students develop techniques for reading new poems, determining their themes, and discussing the language and relationship of any noteworthy poetic devices to the themes. It is important that students do not simply identify or list the devices in their essays for the exam.

Whenever possible, teachers should discuss poetic devices and poetic language in the context of actual poems in order to show how these devices support the theme of the poem.

The more students read, discuss, and write about poetry, the better they will respond to this question. Since many poems are easily understood and enjoyed by students at pre-AP levels, teachers can collaborate with colleagues on ways to include poetry reading in all Spanish courses.

Read poems other than those on the reading list and give students the opportunity to write their own poems, particularly those using Spanish rhyme and meter. Students can also enjoy and learn from analyzing with their classmates poems they have brought to class.

Since this question type is the same each year, it can be especially useful to review with students the responses to the poetry question from previous exams. Scoring guidelines, sample questions, and scoring commentary from 1999 to the present are available on AP Central[®] (apcentral.collegeboard.com). Once students are familiar with the scoring guidelines, they can study actual essays from previous years, evaluate their own essays, and work in groups to evaluate

each other's work. They can also write about a poem from a previous exam and compare their work with the essays posted on AP Central.

When evaluating student essays, include commentary on both content and language usage.

The scoring guidelines for the exam indicate that the more successful essays are well developed and well organized. Teachers can help students by:

- giving them the opportunity to practice techniques for outlining their ideas;
- showing them how to stay on topic and pointing out the ideas or commentary in their essays that are not relevant to the question;
- teaching them how to write effective thesis statements and conclusions;
- developing and practicing with them a list of expressions to use for linking sentences and paragraphs;
- training them in the use of subordinate clauses in order to avoid simplistic sentences and excessive repetition; and
- giving them practice with circumlocution and the use of synonyms as ways to enrich writing.

Students also benefit from practice in dealing with the time constraints of writing the poetry essay. They should allow themselves time to take notes or prepare an outline, and they should leave some time to reread and edit their work. However, they should *not* write out full drafts of their essays because of the danger of running out of time while recopying their draft into their exam booklet.

Question 2: Thematic Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

In this Thematic Analysis Type B question, students were asked to write an essay comparing how two works selected from a list of four titles treat the apparent differences in the experiences of men and women in the world. (In Type A questions, students select one work from a list of two or more, and no comparison is involved.)

How well did students perform on this question?

This year's content mean score was 4.4 out of a possible nine points; the language mean score was 3.0 out of a possible five points. These scores compare favorably with those for 2003, with the content mean score being slightly higher this year. The works listed in the question were familiar to most students, and students seemed to have little trouble selecting two about which to write. Students were also able to recall enough pertinent details to support their essays. Nevertheless, although this was the second time the revised AP Spanish Literature Exam has been given, there were still some students who indicated they could not write the essay because they had not read the works.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors and omissions included:

- lack of an explicit comparison of how the two selected works treat the differences in the experiences of men and women;
- insufficient examples from the texts to support the responses;

- inclusion of excessive plot summary and relatively little analysis;
- providing a response that was so general and had so few links to the text that the Reader suspected the student had not read the works;
- use of details that were irrelevant to the question;
- inclusion of a significant number of erroneous statements;
- inability to deal with the question because of not having read or not being able to recall the works;
- poor organization; and
- many grammar and vocabulary errors.

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 need to read the question carefully. It can be pointed out that when they are to select two works, the question always calls for a comparison. Before writing their essay, they should think through and perhaps make a note of the points they will compare. There is no single model for successful literature essays, but one approach for this question could have been to start with the comparison instead of simply writing about the experiences of men and women in the individual works and then determining *a posteriori* which points to compare.

Essays that have no thesis are most often not successful. The first paragraph should contain a thesis statement that is then developed in the subsequent paragraphs. In addition, when an essay lacks focus or the focus wanders, it is often because the student has not developed the thesis that was set out at the beginning.

A strong conclusion to an essay often helps it recover from defects in the introduction or the body. Students can improve their essay writing ability by practicing techniques for composing effective conclusions.

It is important that students read all of the works on the reading list and that they read them in Spanish. For the sake of expediency, some teachers skip works, read abbreviated versions, or have their students read them in English. These techniques are usually counterproductive. If students read in English, not only are they defeating one of the main goals of the course, they will lack the language resources they will need to write about the works. As for omitting required texts or reading abridged versions, this is too much of a gamble.

See the comments for Question 1 for additional suggestions on successful essay writing.

Question 3: Text Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

In this Text Analysis Type A question, students were asked to respond to two questions about “El alacrán de Fray Gómez,” by Ricardo Palma. In Part (a) they were to analyze the role of the narrator in the text printed in the exam booklet, a selection from the beginning of the *tradición*; in Part (b) they were asked to discuss how the style of the passage cited is representative of that of “El alacrán de Fray Gómez.” (In Type B questions, students analyze a critical excerpt about a particular work from the required reading list.)

How well did students perform on this question?

The content mean score for Part (a) was 2.0 out of a possible five points and for Part (b), 1.5 out of a possible five points. The total content mean score was thus an unimpressive 3.5 out of a possible 10 points. The language mean score was 1.9 out of a possible five points. Unfortunately, there were many blank, extremely brief, or otherwise very inadequate responses, with the result being that 21 percent of the students earned a content score of 0 or 1. While this is an unusually large percentage of very low scores, there were also more perfect scores for content than on either of the two other essay questions on this year's exam.

Clearly, however, a significant percentage of the students was unprepared for this kind of question. The source of their difficulty seemed to be not so much the format of this two-part question as the inability of many of them to deal with the question itself (i.e., style and the role of the narrator). Perhaps, also, it was hard for them to connect the discussion in Part (a) with the remainder of the text, as was required in Part (b). Finally, it seemed that a significant number of students had not read or did not remember "El alacrán de Fray Gómez" and could only respond to Part (a).

What were common student errors or omissions?

It appeared from the responses that, although students are used to analyzing themes in literature, as in Question 2, many are not accustomed to dealing with questions of style and structure. Even though they had the text before them, they had difficulty analyzing the role of the narrator, one of the most important aspects of Ricardo Palma's narrative technique in the *tradiciones*. Some students also had trouble analyzing the style of the excerpt as required in Part (b) and applying it to their discussion of the rest of the *tradicición*. Possibly, they could not recall the work well enough to be able to develop a response about its style. Although it was intended that students write a separate short response to each of the two questions, some wrote a single essay. They were not penalized for doing this.

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?

The most important way to help students improve their performance on this type of question is to include the analysis of literary style in the course. Students should be able to discern the salient stylistic features of a given text as well as deal with issues like genre, point of view, structure, and the role of the narrator, all of which are normal in college introductory literature courses.

Since Question 3 can take the form of two different types, students will benefit from practice with both. Type A, as on this year's exam, requires short answers to two or three open-ended questions about an excerpt from a work on the required reading list. Responses to these questions are normally shorter than those for Questions 1 and 2; they should be separate and they need not take the form of a fully developed essay.

Students should read all of the works on the required reading list. Any review prior to the exam should include questions of style as well as those of theme, plot, and character.

Careful, close reading of literary texts, examining the vocabulary and other linguistic features of those texts, and working with students on language usage in their own writing will result in significant linguistic progress during the AP Spanish Literature course and will eventually be reflected in students' performance on the exam.