



## Student Performance Q&A:

### 2004 AP<sup>®</sup> U.S. History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2004 free-response questions for AP<sup>®</sup> U.S. History were written by the Chief Reader, Diane Vecchio of Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. 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?***

The intent of this document-based question (DBQ) was to have students analyze the changes caused by the French and Indian War and also to demonstrate a sense of change over time by looking at events just prior to and after the war. The documents were chosen to help students respond to the three aspects of the question—political, economical, and ideological—and discuss the extent to which the French and Indian War was a turning point in American history.

##### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

Overall, students found this question difficult, possibly because it covered an early time period. Almost all of the essays had a thesis, but there were large variances in the ways in which the documents were used and in the analysis and thesis development. Students had difficulty dealing with the ideological aspects of the question. There was a paucity of outside information, and a number of essays paraphrased the documents. Several essays answered the question without using the documents. A number of essays used Document A (maps of North America, 1754 and 1763) and used it well. The mean score was 3.6 out of a possible nine points.

##### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

A number of essays went well beyond the time period of the question and discussed the causes of the American Revolution. Document B (Canassatego's speech), Document C (George Washington's letter), and Document E (Thomas Barnard's sermon) were often misinterpreted. Students provided very little contextual information for the documents.

***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 be reminded that they should always answer the question that has been asked rather than make up an answer to something they would rather discuss instead (a behavior Readers saw often). Students also erred by dealing with material outside of the time period. An important point to emphasize for the DBQ is conceptualizing a balanced response to a question, starting with an idea about what the question is asking—and only then going to the documents. A consistent problem continues to be students repeating the documents (either by quoting or paraphrasing) rather than extracting a main idea that is relative to the question that has been asked.

## **Question 2**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was to measure students' knowledge of social history during the last quarter of the eighteenth century by focusing on two major groups (slaves and women) that held disadvantaged legal and social status during this time.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The responses to this question were relatively weak. Students who selected this question tended to score lower than students who chose other questions to answer. The mean score was 2.6 out of a possible nine points versus 3.7 out of a possible nine points for those responding to Question 3.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

The most common student error was to focus on events during the revolution rather than on the impact of the revolution itself. There were a few solid essays regarding women during this time period, but students only occasionally used relevant material properly, as in the case with Abigail Adams's letter to John. Some students mentioned New Jersey's accidental provision for women voting, while others mentioned Republican Motherhood. Beyond that, most students simply limited themselves to women being more highly respected because of their expanded roles during the war and in the absence of their spouses.

***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?***

More social history needs to be addressed in the survey course. Students need to be more clear in their understanding of what such terms as "impact" mean. They need to understand conceptual terms like "social class" and "status" and what is called for by a question that tells them to analyze. Themes need to be carried out consistently throughout the essay from start to conclusion. Finally, students need to be more attentive to the time frames laid out in essay questions.

### Question 3

#### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This question asked students to analyze the effectiveness of compromise in reducing sectional tensions between 1820 and 1861. To analyze effectiveness, students needed to discuss the outcome of specific compromises rather than merely describe individual compromises. Students could draw on a variety of issues to answer the question (e.g., slavery, the tariff, and states' rights). Students could also organize their essays around a chronological or topical analysis (e.g., political leadership, tariffs, slavery, popular sovereignty, and/or political parties); however, their focus needed to remain on analyzing the *effectiveness* of political compromise. In addition, the question lent itself to an analysis of changes in the effectiveness of compromise over time. Students might recognize, for example, that compromise was more difficult to achieve as sectional issues became more complex and participants' views hardened.

#### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

Generally, students who answered this question provided strong answers. The mean score was 3.7 out of a possible nine points, significantly higher than the mean score for Question 2. The total mean score for Standard Essay Group I (Questions 2 or 3) was 3.1 out of a possible nine points.

Responses to this question were generally the best of all the answers. It was clear that students had studied this question. Overall, more students performed better on this question and the time period it covered than in previous years. A fair number dealt with the time period of the questions (1820–61) but not with the various compromises and issues individually. These responses indicated an understanding of change over time and that compromise became increasingly difficult to achieve. Essays in the middle range described the specifics of the various compromises and issues but provided less analysis. Some students had a weak understanding of chronology and often made sweeping generalizations (e.g., the North was entirely industrial and totally against slavery), and they carried this tendency into their discussion of compromise; the stronger essays analyzed each.

#### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Many students dealt with only the North and South in responding to sectional tensions and ignored the West. When the West was incorporated, it was treated with simplicity and usually in the context of westward expansion. There was a monolithic treatment of slavery. The chronology tended to be jumbled and the treatment of the time span was uneven.

#### ***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?***

Teachers need to emphasize the importance of chronology over dates and facts. In addition, students should be reminded of the importance of essay organization (i.e., introduction, body, and conclusion). Students need to focus closely on the question itself, noting the importance of words like “analyze” and “tensions.” Students should also strive to cover the entire time span, along with the importance of historical change over time.

## Question 4

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was to elicit student responses that showed an understanding of the programs and policies designed by reformers of the Progressive Era and the New Deal. Students needed to demonstrate knowledge of the programs and policies that addressed the needs of those living in poverty during both historical periods and then compare and contrast those programs and policies, citing specific, factual information to support their assertions. The question was designed to avoid a straight compare and contrast of the Progressive Era and the New Deal by asking students to confine their answers to the programs and policies that addressed the needs of the impoverished.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

Apparently, this was a difficult question that yielded many low scores, as evidenced by the mean score of 2.8 out a possible nine points.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Students had trouble connecting Progressive Era programs and policies to issues of poverty at the time, which may have been one of the primary reasons so few students selected this question. Overall, the link students made between poverty and the programs and policies was stronger when addressing the New Deal. Students were able to provide more specifics on the New Deal programs and policies than those of the Progressive Era, and in some cases they struggled to find a link between the programs and policies of the Progressive Era and poverty. Students broadly interpreted the phrase “those living in poverty.”

### ***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 be reminded to formulate a thesis that addresses the question, keeping in mind the parameters of the question that has been asked. In this question, the importance of connecting two historical periods and focusing on key wording like “poverty” was essential.

## Question 5

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was for students to demonstrate their understanding of the successes and failures of the Cold War policy of containment in a global context. The question specifically asked students to analyze the successes and failures of the U.S. Cold War policy of containment as it developed during the period of 1945 to 1975 in two of the four regions of the world. Although students did not have to explicitly define containment in their responses, they were expected to demonstrate a clear understanding of its definition.

The question called for students to choose two of the four world regions—East and Southeast Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East—and provide relevant information that supported their analysis of the successes and failures of containment. Although the question required

students to deal with two regions, it did not necessarily require balance; thus, a student could get a high score while treating containment in one region with less depth than the other. The question did not ask for a summary of events that occurred in any of these regions during the time period or for a description of the Cold War. Instead, it asked students to analyze the successes and failures of containment. Although “developed” was a key word in the question, it was not necessarily so in student responses.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The students who chose this question generally did well in their responses in comparison to the responses to Question 5 in recent years. The mean score was 3.8 out of a possible nine points. The mean score for Standard Essay Group II (Questions 4 or 5) was 3.5 out of a possible nine points.

Most students knew something about the Cold War and many of them demonstrated an appropriate understanding of containment. They did better with regard to Europe and East and Southeast Asia, although their supporting evidence in both areas was usually not expansive. This evidence often focused instead on a few key examples of economic containment like the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine in Europe and the political/military aspect of the Korean War and Vietnam in Asia. The better essays provided both depth and breadth in their responses.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

The most common error was in chronology. Confusion over the definitions of “Cold War” and “containment” was the most significant error seen in the responses. Students often wrote in generalities rather than providing specific examples that were relevant to the successes and failures of containment. Generally, there was a dearth of information on containment in the Middle East and Latin America. Other than the current Middle East crisis, students had little knowledge of this region of the world.

***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?***

Remind students to read the questions carefully and, after making their selection, to focus on the question that has been asked. It is imperative that students realize that many questions have multiple parts and that they should be sure to respond to all of the parts. Teachers should stress the value of a clear, definitive thesis statement that pays special attention to the parameters of the question with regard to time period, regions of the world, and the action required in the response (e.g., analyze/compare and contrast/explain the significance of). Teachers should emphasize the critical importance of supporting a thesis with solid, relevant, historical information. Good organization and clear writing also enhance the quality of an answer.