



Advanced Placement
Program

Student Performance Q&A: 2005 AP® English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP® English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David A. Jolliffe of the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, with the assistance of three Question Leaders for the AP Exam: Mary Rigsby of the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia; Donald Bushman of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington; and Kathleen Puhr of Clayton High School in St. Louis, Missouri. These comments 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?

This was an argument question. It asked students to read an excerpt of an article, “Training for Statesmanship,” written in 1953 by George Kennan, one of the architects of American foreign policy at the time. In the excerpt, Kennan offers several observations about the relations among power, control, and conformity in the United States. The question directed students to select the observation Kennan makes that they found most compelling and to write an essay arguing the extent to which that observation holds true in the United States or any other country. The question called upon students to demonstrate their abilities to comprehend nonfiction prose; to focus on a single, salient observation among the many in the passage; to state and develop with appropriate evidence a position on the viability and relevance of the observation they focused upon; and to write clear, correct, mature prose.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.72 out of a possible 9 points. Because it asked students to select and write an essay about the observation they found most compelling, the question offered a great deal of flexibility and accessibility. No single point of view predominated in the responses. Students focused on a wide array of issues involving conformity, as well as on the diffusion of power in the

United States, the concentration of power in other countries, the power of courts of law and police establishments in the United States and other countries, and the power of such irregular forces as terrorist organizations. Successful responses drew evidence from psychology, economics, history, political science, current events, popular culture, and the students' own homes, schools, and communities. The best answers contextualized the topic for the Readers, offered a clear assertion about the selected observation, and developed an essay in a manner that suggested the students were in conversation with an engaged reader.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students made four common errors. The first, and most prevalent, was producing an essay that had neither a strong claim to make about Kennan's most compelling observation nor clear, appropriate evidence to support a claim. The second was offering a tangential composition that by and large ignored Kennan's observations. The third was getting caught up in logical flaws and incoherent explanations. The last was attempting to use literary examples that were inappropriate or irrelevant for this particular question.

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 can do three things to help improve their students' performance on the exam.

First, they should emphasize a function of rhetorical training that has roots in the Classical period, particularly in the works of Isocrates in ancient Greece and Cicero and Quintilian in Rome. This is the function of producing the citizen orator, the liberally educated person who is able to respond to the vast array of issues that confronts anyone who lives in a complex culture like ours. A citizen orator reads widely in current events, history, politics, literature, science, and the arts and is able to write essays for a generalist audience that draw upon that person's reading.

Second, teachers should offer ample opportunities for students to (1) read texts that have multiple observations or perspectives, (2) select what they consider to be the most compelling or useful of these observations or perspectives, and (3) explain and justify why they have chosen those observations or perspectives.

Finally, teachers should instruct students in the difference between writing an essay and producing an answer for an exam question. The former is a rich, self-sufficient composition. It contextualizes the prompt for an engaged and curious reader, enters into conversation with the reader, elaborates its points with ample reasoning and evidence, and offers road signs that guide the reader through the argument. The latter simply makes claims about the prompt and then offers material, often briefly and summarily, to support those claims.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question called for rhetorical analysis. It offered students a mock press release from *The Onion*, a publication devoted to humor and satire, announcing a new product called "MagnaSoles shoe inserts." The students were directed to write an essay analyzing the strategies used in the mock press release to satirize how products are marketed to consumers. The question asked

students to examine and analyze a humorous text from the contemporary media, to base their analysis—at least in part—on their understanding of the role satire plays in the promulgation of ideas in their culture, and to write clear, correct, analytic prose.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.92 out of a possible 9 points. The majority of the answers suggested that analyzing an advertisement was a task students were familiar with and willing to perform. Successful answers suggested that students clearly understood the satire offered in the mock press release, both in particular and in general terms. That is, the best compositions not only pointed out the ample satirical elements in the *Onion* article but also explained *why* these elements should be seen as satirical in this text. A great many of these compositions, moreover, showed an awareness of the function of satire in contemporary culture. Students alluded to the satire they see in such television programs as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *The Daily Show*. Having read Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” helped some students to see satire, as one student put it, “as a mirror held up to our culture to see what we’ve become.”

What were common student errors or omissions?

Readers saw two common student errors, one relating to this question in particular and one relating to analysis questions in general. The particular problem involved not recognizing the satire in the mock press release. Many students analyzed the text as an *example of marketing strategies* instead of a *satirical commentary* on how these strategies prey on consumers. The more general problem involved not having a sufficient repertoire of analytic concepts to use in addressing the prompt. Many students seemed unable to recognize and explain the features of argument structure, rhetorical appeal, organization, and style that enabled the article to accomplish its satirical purpose.

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 are urged to adopt three practices to help improve their students’ performance on this part of the exam.

First, they should instruct their students in rhetorical purpose and expose them to a wide variety of texts that accomplish different rhetorical purposes: commenting on a cultural phenomenon, informing a reader about something novel and important, convincing a reader to accept a salient central idea, persuading a reader to think or act in a different way, and so on.

Second, teachers, while they are teaching canonical works from American, British, and world literature, should show students how texts from contemporary culture accomplish many of the same purposes the canonical works do.

Finally, teachers should explicitly incorporate theories of rhetoric and practices of rhetorical analysis into their courses so that students become more attuned to the ways in which texts shape ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices in their world.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question combined analysis and argument. It provided students with an enthymeme—an argument in brief—from “The Singer Solution to World Poverty.” Peter Singer, a bioethicist, maintains that prosperous people should donate to overseas organizations such as UNICEF or Oxfam America all money not needed for the basic requirements of life. Students were asked to write an essay in which they evaluated the pros and cons of Singer’s argument, supported their evaluation of each side with appropriate evidence, and indicated which side they found more persuasive. The task called upon students to flesh out the structure of Singer’s argument, especially its underlying assumptions or warrants. Additionally, the question required students to produce clear, correct, analytic and argumentative prose.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.67 out of a possible 9 points. Because the prompt was provocative and about money, almost every student was able to find a way into this question. The best essays offered a full discussion of both the pros and the cons of Singer’s argument and addressed a broad range of underlying assumptions. They offered not only ample, appropriate evidence but also sophisticated reasoning, drawing on philosophers and economists, historical events, and literary texts. Some of these essays ultimately rejected Singer’s proposal, defending American capitalism and the American dream, worrying about the impact on businesses should Americans stop buying luxury items, and suggesting that handouts might cause dependency among receiving nations. Others supported Singer’s proposal, at least in spirit, arguing that it would improve America’s reputation in the world, eliminate terrorism, reduce crime, offer tax write-offs, satisfy donors’ innate desire for justice, and address Americans’ conspicuous consumption and apparent naiveté about global economics.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students’ essays showed two problems, again one pertaining to this question in particular and one concerning argument questions in general. The first involved omitting a substantial consideration of either the pros or the cons of Singer’s argument. Many answers either supported the proposal wholeheartedly or, more frequently, dismissed it summarily. The second involved producing essays that relied on thin generalizations, tabloid-like comments about celebrities and their wealth, and a passing acquaintance with current events.

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?

Most importantly, teachers are urged to ask their students to see more than one side of challenging, controversial issues. Doing so is a difficult task in contemporary culture. The media that students are exposed to—newspapers, radio, television, the Internet—frequently promote only one side of an issue, belittle or ignore opposing positions, and offer only a glimmer of rational discussion about the complexity of the controversy. Instruction in courses preparing students for the AP English Language and Composition Exam, therefore, needs to attend to discussions of current events in the media but transcend their one-sidedness. Students who succeeded on

question 3 evidently came from classrooms where discussions were encouraged and differing opinions valued, where topics were allowed to have pros and cons. They came from classrooms where students synthesized ideas from their reading, observation, and experience, from the social sciences, natural and life sciences, literature, and the arts, as well as from their travel, work experience, and immersion in whatever media outlets they could find that reflect multiple viewpoints. These students had been taught to think not only outside the box but also around the globe.