

Student Performance Q&A: 2005 AP® Psychology Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP® Psychology were written by the Chief Reader, Jane Halonen of the University of West Florida in Pensacola. 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 question was not only to provide broad coverage of specified content in introductory psychology but also to challenge students a bit more than they have been on past exams by increasing the cognitive level of the free-response questions. Rather than simply requiring a definition of eight concepts, as students might have expected from past practices, question 1 this year asked them to provide examples of those concepts, thereby demonstrating a higher-order ability to apply psychology terminology. The Psychology Development Committee purposefully selected terms to represent a full range of discrimination, including easy, medium, and more challenging terms; however, based on student performance, the question may have been perceived as harder than the committee intended in its design.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.87 out of a possible 8 points. The distribution of scores was dramatically skewed, with the modal response being 0. As such, the question probably discriminated high-end performance well and low-end performance poorly. Although examples of successful responses exist at every numerical level in the range, overall performance suggests that students found this question particularly challenging.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The preponderance of scores of 0 suggests that students struggled on this question. Some of the students may not have read the instructions carefully. If students practiced for this exam by taking

released exams from prior years, they may have superimposed a lower-level interpretation on the question and answered it in a way that defined rather than applied the terms.

The scoring guidelines did not provide for partial credit for definitions; many students would have earned higher scores if the guidelines had been loosened to include that level of achievement. As such, students could have come away from the exam believing they did better than their actual performance because they did not respond to the application level of cognition the exam requested from them. Students wrote substantial amounts of text in response to this question, but Readers reported there was often little in those answers that could be scored.

Some of the terms, particularly “optimistic explanatory style” and “ethnocentrism,” seemed to induce much more guessing than actual content explanation. “Optimistic explanatory style” raised the question of how the Development Committee should regard research that is more cutting edge. That term is sufficiently established in the literature and in the selection of textbooks the committee reviewed when creating the question; therefore, the committee did not anticipate it being problematic.

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 to their students the need to be prepared to respond to free-response questions from a critical thinking vantage point. They must read the question carefully, perhaps underlining the required cognitive action (e.g., “define,” “apply,” “compare”), a strategy that might help students write more successful responses.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question was designed to move the cognitive challenge beyond application to evaluation/judgment and require students to develop their ideas in greater depth. The question presented three controversies in psychology: the nature of language acquisition, hypnosis, and diagnostic labeling. Students had to identify the two sides of each controversy and then select a side to advocate based on the quality of evidence. The three controversies were selected from diverse areas in psychology, addressed both depth and breadth in psychology, and allowed students to demonstrate more sophisticated ability in weighing the nature of psychological evidence.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.81 out of a possible 9 points. Students performed well, and the scores distributed fairly normally with some bimodality. The developers of the scoring guidelines believe the structure of the question lent itself to the bimodality since students tended to earn all 3 points in any given controversy, resulting in scores that clustered at 3 (one controversy) or 6 (two controversies). Initially, the guidelines emphasized research citation, but they were broadened to award points for the use of general principles. In addition, the general format allowed for students to defend a point of view that synthesized the two positions where appropriate, instead of advocating solely for one as stipulated in the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often addressed the question of whether or not hypnosis is effective (a lower-level but still valid question) instead of comparing explanations of how hypnosis works, which is what the question required. Students tended to address both the language acquisition and diagnostic labeling questions with greater competence.

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?

Since this format for a free-response question was a new structure, it probably should serve as a reminder that students should not assume released exams will be structurally similar to the AP Exam they will take. It is especially useful to encourage students to approach free-response questions as an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to identify relationships and apply higher-order thinking skills. Students may have come to expect (wrongly) that each exam question will have some methods-oriented structure. They need to be encouraged to read the question carefully and respond appropriately. It is reasonable to prepare students to expect one of the questions to ask them to go into some depth of explanation.