



Student Performance Q&A: 2005 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Diane C. 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 the question was to test students' understanding of the impact of the American Revolution and to identify change over time. The question required students to analyze the ways in which the American Revolution changed American society and assess the extent to which those changes were fundamental. Students were required to address social, economic, and political changes.

How well did students perform on this question?

This was a mainstream, straightforward question that most students were able to answer without much difficulty. Students generally used all of the documents and wrote lengthy essays. The question discriminated well among students, as the higher-level essays contained considerably more outside information and analysis. Students answered the question directly, covered the entire time span of the question, demonstrated good analysis of the documents, and dealt well with political, economic, and social changes. The mean score was 3.72 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students did not address the issue of fundamental change. While their discussions on political and social change were quite good, they had difficulty addressing economic change and placing it in a larger historical context. Students used the documents well with the exception of document F, "Medal of the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture," which they frequently misinterpreted.

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?

Teach students to focus on change over time and the extent to which change affected people's lives.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The question asked students to link economic and political developments in the Massachusetts and Virginia colonies, emphasizing the impact of economics on politics, and to compare and contrast that pattern in the two colonies and in the period between 1607 and 1750.

How well did students perform on this question?

This question was rigorous and complex, asking students to compare and contrast change over time as well as to link economics to political change. Students found this synthesis-and-evaluation question difficult to handle. Most of them performed very poorly or could not answer the question at all. Few could identify the link between economics and politics; many saw religion shaping politics in Massachusetts but not economics. Many students compared the two colonies in terms of the impact of (or absence of) religion, with little or no respect to economics. The mean score was 2.34 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common problem was students' inability to identify the link between economics and politics for one or both colonies. Students either described only economics, or they described economics and politics as two unrelated entities, or they did not know how the economic conditions in Massachusetts affected politics. Consequently, students wrote about religion only or mistakenly wrote about the impact of politics on economics without first establishing the effect of the latter on the former.

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 should make sure that concepts and key terms are clear to students. It is important to link discussions of topics that appear in different textbook chapters but that relate to the same colony/state/issue/development. Encourage more compare-and-contrast discussions.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to have students analyze the extent to which sectional interests shaped the debates about the Mexican War. The question also required that students connect the

debates, the war, and its aftermath. Students needed to exhibit good organizational and analytical skills in answering this question.

How well did students perform on this question?

The question was difficult and complex, asking students to compare and contrast change over time and link economic and political changes as well. Given the question's complexity and multilayered aspects, however, sophisticated students did quite well. Most students knew something about the time frame; often they exceeded expectations with the quality of the specifics they offered, especially those regarding political history. Students who performed poorly appeared not to understand all that the question asked. The mean score was 2.99 out of a possible 9 points. The mean score for Standard Essay Group I (question 2 or 3) was 2.71 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Often students did not treat the entire time period comprehensively; essays frequently terminated with the Compromise of 1850. Some students did not know what to do with the West as a section; few understood that it was a fluid region made up of multiple peoples and presented it instead as a homogenous population. Students also could not distinguish the North from New England, generalized that all southerners were slaveholders, and often gave western interests short shrift. Very few students dealt with the breakup and realignment of political parties during the period. Students tended to concentrate more on the aftermath of the Mexican War than on the debates over the war itself. Some viewed the question as a "coming of the Civil War" opportunity.

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?

Teach students good, solid diplomatic and political history. Always note the interplay between and among the political systems, diplomatic maneuverings, economic differences, and other forces. Teach cause and effect and change over time to help students develop a better grasp of chronology and causation.

Have students respond to questions from released AP United States History Exams in the exam's 30- to 35-minute time frame. Instruct students to answer the question that has been asked and to recognize the expectations of such terms as "to what extent."

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students both to provide a description of the patterns of immigration during two time periods selected *and* to compare and contrast the responses of Americans to immigrants in both time periods. Students could choose from three time periods: 1820–1860, 1880–1924, and 1965–2000. In the description of patterns of immigration, students were expected to address questions such as "Who came? Why did they immigrate?" In the contrast and comparison of American responses in both time periods, students were expected to provide specific evidence of similarities, as well as differences.

How well did students perform on this question?

This was a good, mainstream question of moderate difficulty. Yet, while this is a topic most U.S. history courses address, only 19 percent of students selected this question. Students most frequently chose the first two time periods, 1820–1860 and 1880–1924, with most offering a better analysis of the latter. Those students who selected the 1965–2000 time period were the least able to provide specific information, and their responses seemed to reflect a regional perspective based on their personal experience with immigration. The mean score was 3.62 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error occurred when students compared and contrasted immigration patterns in the two time periods by providing only a description of each and how they were similar and different, rather than comparing and contrasting American responses. Some students misplaced the patterns of immigration, confusing the patterns of the old and new immigrations and reversing the order of who came when. Essays that addressed the 1965–2000 time period tended to be the weakest, with vague generalizations on immigration specific to the region with which the students were most familiar. As previously noted, these essays seemed to reflect a regional perspective based on students' personal experience with immigration.

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 is crucial that teachers help their students learn and practice the skills of analyzing a question to determine what it is asking them to do and then performing the tasks the question requires.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question sought to assess students' knowledge of how two of three movements—the Civil Rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the women's movement—transformed American society in the 1960s and 1970s. The question asked students to illustrate their knowledge of the movements they selected and the impact those movements had on American society during those two decades, focusing on the changes that may or may not have occurred as a result. Though oriented toward social history, the question offered ample opportunity for students to discuss the political and economic impact of those movements.

How well did students perform on this question?

This was a straightforward question, but generally students did a better job on the Civil Rights movement and less so on the antiwar and women's movements. Most of the essays on the Civil Rights movement were relegated to the 1950s; however, students usually brought the changes into the 1960s and 1970s with a discussion of the movement's social impact. Although most students selected the Civil Rights movement as one of the two periods they would discuss, the choice between the other two movements was fairly evenly divided. On the whole, students who dealt with the issue of transformation and/or understood the limitations of change resulting from the movements wrote better—often excellent—essays.

The mean score was 3.49 out of a possible 9 points. The mean score for Standard Essay Group II (question 4 or 5) was 3.52 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students tended to include everything they knew about the movements, whether it was relevant to the time period or not. This was especially true in their treatment of the Civil Rights movement. Weaker essays often demonstrated little knowledge and few facts about the antiwar and women's movements. Some students offered anything and everything they knew about race, gender, war, or the 1960s, thus leaving the question unanswered. The term "transform" may have been a problem for students.

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?

Instruct students on how to answer the question that has been asked, stressing the importance of such terms as "analyze," "assess," and "compare and contrast," and reminding them to focus on the question's intent. Encourage students not only to define terms but also to handle ideas and concepts. Always emphasize the basics of good writing, including the importance of the thesis, good organization, and supporting evidence.