



Student Performance Q&A:

2005 AP[®] World History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP[®] World History were written by the Chief Reader, Kenneth R. Curtis of California State University at Long Beach. 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 document-based question was to assess students' skills in working with a preselected set of documents. Students were asked to analyze the documents, draft an appropriate line of reasoning, and compose an analytical essay. This year's documents all focused on secular nationalism, pan-Arab nationalism, and pan-Islamic nationalism in South Asia and North Africa during the twentieth century. Muslim males wrote all six of the documents. All except one were written or published between 1900 and 1938—a 1985 speech was the single exception. The attribution/source for each document included facts about the authors' social/professional status and about their political activities; in some instances, the dates; and the medium of each document (e.g., letter, speech). In addition, the historical background provided with the question offered information on the 1947 partitioning of South Asia into Pakistan and India and the dates of Algeria's and Egypt's independence from France and Great Britain, respectively. This year's document-based question included no maps, charts, or pictures.

How well did students perform on this question?

On the whole, students performed satisfactorily. The mean score was 3.91 out of a possible 9 points. While this year's mean score was the highest of the three free-response questions, it was lower than those recorded for the document-based question in previous years.

In contrast to previous years, most students this year were able to compose an appropriate thesis statement at the beginning or end of their essay. Most students grouped the documents

appropriately, with the majority of the essays highlighting the documents' pro-/anti-Western attitudes. However, relatively few were able to identify a third grouping to go beyond simple pro and con arguments.

Despite their successful thesis statements and groupings, students clearly had difficulty with the question and understanding the full meaning of the documents. The density and complexity of some of the documents seemed difficult for students to deal with in the time that was available. The most difficult task appeared to have been providing an additional type of document and/or including an author's point of view that was relevant to the topic. Many students did not attempt either task, though both were clearly stated in the question's instructions. Those students who did attempt these tasks often struggled to complete their essays successfully.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Readers saw a wide range of errors that seemed to be linked to difficulties students had in properly interpreting the documents. Above all, the subtleties contained within the documents caused numerous mistakes. One common mistake was to isolate a single sentence embedded within a document and use it exclusively, thus misrepresenting the document's broader meaning.

Far too many students simply failed to respond to the prompt for point-of-view analysis or the requirement that they identify an additional type of document that would help them more fully answer the question. For those who attempted these tasks but failed to earn points in these areas, the most common mistake was to include a point of view or an additional type of document with no explanation as to why it was included or what made it relevant; students seemed to expect the Readers to fill in the meaning. It is difficult to assess why students neglected to discuss point of view or identify an additional type of document, since the instructions explicitly asked for these pieces of information. Readers did not accept mere attribution for the point of view or the identification of an additional type of document without an indication of its relevance.

In general, the difficulty of the documents appears to have been a contributing cause to many students' failure to address point of view or include an appropriate additional type of document. Many well-composed and analytically sophisticated essays did not earn expanded-core points because they omitted mention of any additional type of document. This is especially disappointing because last year many students were successful in citing an additional type of document and relating it to their analysis. This year's scoring guidelines were adjusted to require only one point-of-view analysis, but many students still struggled to meet this minimal requirement.

Another common error arose from the historical background, which noted that "in 1947 British-controlled South Asia was partitioned to form the Islamic state of Pakistan and the secular state of India." Many students reading this appeared to have begun their essays based upon this information instead of proceeding first to the documents themselves.

Despite the slippage in the areas of point of view, additional types of documents, and historical background, students did a much better job of grouping and describing the meaning of the documents. Most students understood that they needed to explain why a document was significant and explicitly justify the rationale they were using to group the documents. Still, students and teachers need to remember that to receive the point for "supports thesis with appropriate evidence from documents," students must unambiguously explain *why* a document is significant or supports their thesis.

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 continue to emphasize and explain the use of point of view in student responses to the document-based question. They should also avoid allowing students to use the word “bias.” Too many students simply stated that “an individual is biased because they are X, Y, or Z” and then believed they had fulfilled the requirement for that point. Instead, students must go beyond a mere description of an individual or defining characteristic and *explain* why this fact is significant in the analysis of the document. It is key when addressing point of view to explain how the authors’ *background* or *experiences* influenced their ideas.

Students continued to simply ask for “a map,” “a chart that shows the population,” or a document “from a peasant” or “from a woman,” with no indication of how such a document would be relevant to their argument or analysis. While it may be the case that none of these documents appeared in the question, it still is not self-evident why such a document would be relevant. Stress to students that they *must* indicate what the additional document they request would add to their analyses.

Teach students to focus on the meaning of the question. Too many responses attempted to include generic information that had little bearing on the core issues. Additionally, avoid teaching “tricks” to garner points for point of view and additional documents. Instead, emphasize the underlying historical-thinking skills that are relevant to these tasks.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The change-over-time question required students to work within the context of the Atlantic world from 1492 to 1750. Noting that the period was one of new contacts between Western Europe, Africa, and the Americas, the question asked students to analyze the social and economic transformations that resulted from those contacts. The question provided sufficient chronological and geographic information to position the Atlantic world within the context of global history.

How well did students perform on this question?

In general, students performed better on the change-over-time question than in years past, due in part to the mainstream nature of the question. The mean score was 3.4 out of a possible 9 points.

The interactions and exchanges subsequent to expanding European navigation in the Atlantic are well covered in major textbooks. Moreover, students encounter the materials throughout their elementary and secondary school experiences. As might be expected, the most frequent transformations students identified were those related most directly to the Columbian Exchange, with particular regard for the exchange of diseases, crops, and animals between Western Europe and the Americas.

Students were also generally able to make a connection between the development of plantation agriculture in the Americas and the rise of the slave trade in the Atlantic world. Stronger students were able to analyze social and economic changes in detail; for example, those essays often

connected the introduction of sugar in the Americas to the rise of the slave trade and subsequent social changes in Africa and the Americas. It is worth noting that very few students directly addressed social and economic transformation in Europe; most students viewed Europe as an *agent* of change rather than an *object* of change in the Atlantic world.

What were common student errors or omissions?

With regard to content, students demonstrated a general understanding of the period, though they often misused terms. The most commonly misused terms were “imperialism,” used to describe European actions in the sixteenth century, and “genocide,” used to describe the experience of the indigenous peoples in the Americas and Africa. A significant number of essays showed a disconcerting misunderstanding of race and ethnicity.

In general, this year’s essays showed improvement over past change-over-time responses, but the essays nonetheless revealed a continuing problem with thesis and analysis. Thesis statements were often a direct rephrasing of the question or used adjectives like “positive” and “negative” to describe the transformations in the Atlantic world, rather than making an argument about the transformations. Students often blurred the distinction between their description of a transformation and their evidence to support the description.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of essays did not present a discussion of continuity. The use of “transformations” rather than “changes” in the text of the question led most students away from even the most cursory discussion of continuity. The approach many students took to the question indicates that the lessons of past change-over-time questions are being taught in AP World History classrooms. For example, many students attempted to divide the 1492–1750 time period into a beginning, a middle, and an end. This approach did not work well with this year’s change-over-time 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 need to prepare students to read essay prompts closely so that they are able to respond to the question that has been asked. This will improve the caliber of their thesis statements. Better thesis statements will result in clearer distinctions between argument and evidence. In addition, teachers should teach a broad range of approaches to the change-over-time question so that students do not force their responses to conform to a formula. Change-over-time should be taught as applying both to changes within chronological periods and between them. As always, a good essay results from a good thesis.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The primary task of the comparative essay was to analyze similarities and differences, comparing and contrasting the effects of Mongol rule in two of three Eurasian societies. Students were to focus on the period after Mongols took power; therefore, evidence about Mongol invasions and military prowess was irrelevant. Students were to provide political and economic examples of the effects of Mongol rule.

How well did students perform on this question?

In general, students performed better on the comparative essay question this year than they did last year, but their performance was still weak. The mean score was 2.56 out of a possible 9 points, making this the lowest scoring question on the 2005 free-response section.

Student performance was mediocre to poor. Some weak students who had been trained in comparative skills were able to score points without much content. Strong students had thesis statements with content as well as ample evidence at their disposal, and they wrote well-structured essays and made direct comparisons. However, some strong students who clearly had command of the material were penalized because they were not familiar with the comparative skills required by the instructions and scoring guidelines.

It should be noted that the major textbooks vary dramatically in their coverage, as well as their interpretations, of the effects of Mongol rule. The scoring guidelines, therefore, allowed for different interpretations. Only two of the major textbooks cover all four parts of the question as it was asked.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students may have known some content and recognized that the question had four parts, but they were unable to complete effective analyses. Often such essays lacked a strong thesis and did not make sufficiently direct comparisons. Weak students often did not answer the question that had been asked, writing instead about Mongol military trivia rather than the effects of Mongol rule (which, of course, was after the initial conquests). Some included irrelevant information concerning Mughal India, indicating that students sometimes confuse the terms “Mongol” and “Mughal.” Some students were unable to muster evidence to cover the question completely.

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 *must* be taught to write a thesis statement that has more content than merely “There were similarities and differences.” Teach students to ask themselves *what* was similar and *what* was different. Then they can craft a thesis statement that presents an argument based on similarities and differences grounded in the actual historical context, rather than just write generalities.

Students should be taught to organize their essays using the *analytical* categories rather than the geographical categories; in this case, they should have written a paragraph on political effects and a paragraph on economic effects, rather than paragraphs first on area A and then on area B. Students who wrote paragraphs on political and economic effects were much more likely to make direct comparisons than those who wrote a mini-essay about A and a mini-essay about B. Parallel construction of A and B was not sufficient analysis of comparison/contrast. Students cannot expect Readers to make connections and comparisons.

Teachers should use the AP World History Exam scoring guidelines as scaffolding when they teach the comparison essay. Let students have a copy of these guidelines while they write their essays. Eventually they will internalize them. Also, to ensure they are providing students with adequate information, teachers should consult additional texts beyond the one they use in the classroom.