



Student Performance Q&A:

2003 AP[®] English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Marilyn Elkins of California State University in Los Angeles, California. 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?

This question, which instructed students to “defend, challenge, or qualify” the claim that entertainment has the capacity to ruin society, asked students to demonstrate their mastery of argument, a writing task found in most introductory-level college composition courses. Students were supposed to demonstrate that they have the skills to write a developed and convincing argument on a complex topic without oversimplifying or exaggerating, without ignoring the conventions of written English, and without committing serious errors in logic. In the process of writing their arguments, students were expected to demonstrate an ability to use effective rhetorical strategies and to employ a mature prose style.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 5.2 out of a possible nine points. The openness of the prompt allowed students to take a number of approaches: historical, philosophical, cultural, literary, and personal. Students certainly felt sufficiently informed about entertainment, rarely seemed unable to respond, and wrote much longer responses than usual on this topic. This question had the highest mean of the three questions, suggesting that students seemed better prepared to write arguments than analyses or that they found the question to be particularly accessible. Frequently, the best papers acknowledged the complexity of the topic and refused to see the issue in binary terms, recognizing that entertainment has both liabilities and benefits. Middle-range papers were less successful in grappling with such complexities, and these students occasionally overestimated the relationship between entertainment and the effects they described. Weaker students often wrote long harangues about today’s society without offering sufficient support for their somewhat exaggerated claims.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students seemed to forget their audience and assumed the readers shared their knowledge of video games, Web sites, and cartoons; this omission led students to overlook the necessary explanation of how their

evidence supported their claim. Many became overly judgmental, and, overlooking the need for ethos, they “lectured” their audience on the inherent immorality of entertainment; they seemed to assume the audience shared some unspoken warrant that entertainment is evil by its very nature. The most common error students made was failing to define entertainment for the purpose of their arguments; many seemed to be working with an amorphous definition that limited their ability to write a focused and cogent argument.

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?

Writing an effective argument requires a working knowledge of ethos, logos, and pathos, as well as an ability to anticipate the ideas of one’s intended audience. Teachers certainly discuss these elements of argument as they teach the analysis of texts and the way in which writers incorporate rhetorical techniques. While recognizing these elements in the writing of others is important, learning to incorporate effective appeals into one’s own writing is even more instrumental in developing persuasive writing skills. Revising and writing a number of drafts is a good method to help students become more aware of how to consider purpose, audience, and argument as they make choices in constructing their arguments.

Another issue that seemed to confuse some test takers was the position of this question on the exam: some students wrote an analysis of the excerpt from Gabler’s book, even though the prompt clearly asked them to write their own argument. After reading the comments on the Electronic Discussion Group (EDG) for AP English Literature and Composition and talking with several AP teachers and students, I realized that some teachers had told their students that the first question is always an analysis. The Development Committee has no set pattern for asking questions, and teachers need to discourage their students from making assumptions about the intention of a prompt based upon the placement of question types in past exams. Instead, we need to focus on teaching students to read prompts closely and to enable our students to respond to a wide variety of writing tasks and assignments. This can only be accomplished by exposing students to a wide range of writing tasks and assignments, by helping students develop the necessary skills to tackle such tasks, and by giving them timely feedback on their writing.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Question 2 asked students to analyze the persuasive methods used by Alfred M. Green in his April 1861 speech in which he asked his fellow African Americans to join the Union Army in its opposition to slavery. Students were expected to read the speech carefully and to recognize Green’s methods, explaining how they were appropriate for his intended audience and purpose. Whether or not students referred to specific rhetorical techniques, which are simply more specialized terminology for persuasive methods, was less important than the students’ ability to demonstrate an understanding of how and why Green’s methods were particularly persuasive for his intended audience. By asking students to discuss Green’s persuasive methods rather than his rhetorical devices, we hoped to avoid essays in which students parade a long list of memorized terms without providing explanations of how and why these rhetorical devices are appropriate choices.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 5.15 out of a possible nine points. In general, students found Green’s text to be accessible and interesting. The openness of the prompt allowed for a wide range of responses. The best writers were able to discuss what table leader Ralph Goldstein termed “Green’s sense of urgency, the vitality of his elevated language, his anticipation of objections, demonizing of secessionists, and appeal to a brighter future.” Middle-range papers were less successful in their analyses, frequently overlooking the relationship between Green’s choices and his intended audience. Yet even the weakest papers were able to offer some comment about Green’s rhetoric or purpose.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students still overlooked the all important “so what.” They listed methods but failed to explain how they worked and why they were appropriate. Other students seemed to spend far too much time locating Green’s speech in its time and era, perhaps providing information about the Civil War that they had studied in their American history course. While some of this information was interesting, it usually did little to strengthen the analysis of the speech and wasted valuable minutes of the students’ time. Some students simply summarized, demonstrating once again that analysis is still difficult for students who have not been carefully trained in its use.

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?

Effective analysis always makes the implicit explicit; the best analytic essays allow readers to follow the steps involved in the process of uncovering the implicit. Teaching rhetorical situation and the way in which it influences a writer’s choices is critical in teaching students to write such essays. Analyzing argument and language without paying attention to the author’s purpose and intended audience is an empty exercise that produces essays in which students merely present laundry lists of techniques they can identify.

One method to help prevent this superficial analysis is to insist on students’ explaining the connection between every method (or rhetorical term) they discover in a given text and the author’s purpose and audience. Rhetorical terminology is useful in this process — it provides a shorthand method for discussing many of the most important methods a writer uses — but it is less essential in writing an analytical essay than the use of critical thinking skills and a clear understanding of how language functions. If we are spending so much time having our students memorize rhetorical terms that we overlook teaching these essential skills, then we should throw away our lists.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question provided descriptions of the flight of flocks of birds written by James Audubon and Annie Dillard and asked students to compare and contrast how the authors conveyed the effect of witnessing these flights. This analysis question expected students to use a common rhetorical mode, comparison and contrast, to recognize and explain the similarities and differences in the two authors’ approaches. It was designed to allow students to exhibit their understanding of the relationship between effect and language and to acknowledge and explain how language helps writers convey a very personalized presentation of an event.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students responded less well to this question; its average mean score was 4.62 out of a possible nine points, almost .5 points lower than the means of the other two. The Audubon and Dillard passages were more similar than pairs from past exams and, therefore, required close attention to the subtleties of language. Some students seemed to find this aspect of the question especially challenging, while others simply found the topic to be less engaging than that of the other questions. The best students, however, were able to write papers that fully explored the two responses. These students were able to substantiate their analysis with careful consideration of Dillard and Audubon's language, often finding that Audubon was more scientific and Dillard more emotional, and they were able to offer a variety of plausible explanations for this difference. Middle-range papers often seemed to be stretching to use some memorized formula, trotting out a list of terms that frequently seemed unconnected to the texts. The weakest essays usually provided a summary or they misread the passages in some way.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students misread the two essays and, consequently, missed the overall effect that the writers were conveying. Others failed to characterize the two passages at all and turned the assignment into one in which they made various observations about the two texts with a ping-pong effect that undercut the cohesiveness of their analysis. Some launched into an analysis of parts, and the resulting essays were filled with concrete examples without any indication of what the examples exemplified. As was true with Question 2, far too many students relied on summary, telling readers what the authors said rather than explaining how they employed language to create an effect.

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?

Comparison and contrast is a rhetorical mode that I suspect is in most writing teachers' repertoire, but when the items being compared are quite similar, paying attention to nuances becomes even more essential to the essay. While any analysis should avoid stating the obvious, looking for what needs explaining and accomplishing that task are what distinguishes the effective analytic essay. Teachers need to train students to stop settling for their first impression, which is usually too obvious to be interesting. Instead, we need to guide students to interrogate their first impressions to discover how and why they are inaccurate. The process of proposing and rejecting these first responses will help students in finding an interpretation that is neither an overstatement nor a restatement of the obvious. One way to help students become more fluent in this process is to ask them to write informally about what they do not understand in their reading assignments; this constant exploration of their reading — and the way in which they respond to it — can lead to the development of stronger analytic and interpretive skills.

As is certainly true with regard to improving students' performance on this question, and all of the questions on this exam, teachers also need to attend AP workshops and Summer Institutes to learn more about how they can improve their teaching. AP Central™ (apcentral.collegeboard.com) also provides teachers with effective teaching strategies. Additional graduate work, especially in advanced composition, is also useful. Finally, teachers need to write more. By actively using the writing process ourselves, we remember how complicated writing can be, how tricky it is to locate an honest center from which to write and establish our own voice, and how tough it is to find the words and structure we need to complete this process. This reflection on our own writing fosters that of our students.