



Student Performance Q&A: 2003 AP[®] Human Geography Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] Human Geography were written by the Chief Reader, Adrian Bailey of the University of Leeds in Leeds, England. 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 to test students' ability to apply an important concept in human geography (in this case, core-periphery relations) to a real-world situation (the development of the urban systems in northern Argentina and Germany). Although not explicitly called for by the stimulus, the question also gave students an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to think at multiple geographic scales (in this case, national and international) and to think critically about the application of key geographic concepts in different geographic places (in this case, Argentina and Germany). Students were provided with a map stimulus that contained information on the main road networks and the hierarchy of urban places in these two areas.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed modestly well on this question. The mean score was 1.96 out of a possible six points. A large number of responses earned a score of 0 (23.2 percent) or 1 (21.7 percent). Only 8.3 percent of the responses earned a score of 5 or 6.

The question discriminated between three groups of students:

- Typically scoring fewer than two points, one group of responses summarized map content (e.g., cities are located at road intersections) but did not describe those aspects of urban systems clearly affected by core-periphery relations.
- The second, and largest, group of responses described one or two features of urban development (e.g., primacy, road network orientation) and provided process-based links to core-periphery relations.

- Responses typically scoring five or six points linked multiple features of urban system development to core-periphery relations in both Argentina and Germany and at both national and international scales (though the latter was not a specific element of the rubric).

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Many answers demonstrated a poor understanding of core-periphery relations and a reticence to apply the concept to the map stimuli.
- Some responses gave definitions of core-periphery but were less successful in linking these ideas to patterns on the map stimuli. Many 0-point responses simply described map pattern in a way that was unrelated to the intent of the question (e.g., noting that cities occur at road junctions).
- Some responses evidenced poor map reading skills (e.g., not taking into account the different scales of the two map stimuli).
- Many students misapplied concepts to the question (e.g., explanations featuring suburbanization were misplaced).
- Given that this question tested application and synthesis and the rubric gave points for evidence of these approaches, a large number of student answers were too brief to attract credit from the rubric.
- Climate and landform-based explanations of settlement patterns earned zero points.

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?

The following is a summary of ideas that were generated in discussion and collaboration with the readers of the 2003 AP Human Geography Exam. They represent the collective wisdom of a group of people with both firsthand expertise of the challenges students faced on the exam and direct experience of regularly offering the course. Some comments apply to just this question and some may apply more generally.

- The concept of core-periphery was not well understood by many students. Familiarize students with the full definitions of relevant terms, definitions, and concepts. It is important to bear in mind that, as with any discipline, there is some variation in usage of terms between authors. This is reflected in the content of many textbooks. AP Human Geography has a policy of not endorsing textbooks, and we recommend teachers consult as many texts as possible when formulating definitions. Refer to the AP Human Geography Course Description: May 2004, 2005 for guidance on which topics and concepts students need to study in depth. Use a variety of texts and content sources to develop lesson plans.
- Use the AP Human Geography Electronic Discussion Group (EDG) and the resources on AP Central™ (apcentral.collegeboard.com) to access teaching tips, human geography content, and past exam questions. This helps give students opportunities to practice working with, reading, and becoming discerning (and confident) consumers of maps, diagrams, figures, graphs, population pyramids, and more.

- This question tested understanding, synthesis, application, and critique. Because such an item regularly appears on the AP Human Geography Exam, encourage students to develop successful tactics for responding to this “structured response” item. This includes: practicing similarly directed questions, answering questions in the way they are structured (points are allocated for subparts of the question and not for the overall answer as in some other subjects), dispensing with context-setting introductory paragraphs, and paying careful attention to the specific instruction (e.g., define, explain, discuss, and so on).
- Students should practice writing 15- to 20-minute responses.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students’ ability to link tourism to the distinctiveness of the built environment of landscapes. As on past exams, this question gave students an opportunity to draw material from different sections of the course outline (e.g., economic development, urban, and culture). While the topics of tourism and landscape are often treated in different sections of the course, students were asked to construct a plausible argument in favor of and against a particular hypothesis (place distinctiveness) that appears in a third section of the course (culture). Thus, the question tested their ability to pull together and synthesize material from across the course.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.98 out of a possible six points (or 49.7 percent of the maximum). Students scored most strongly on this item, with 23.4 percent earning a score of 5 or 6 and only 11 percent earning a score of 0.

The question discriminated between three groups of students. Typically scoring fewer than two points, one group of responses neither identified one of the key processes linking tourism and landscape (e.g., standardization/marketing) nor gave relevant landscape evidence. The second group of responses often provided discussion of evidence but did not link this evidence back to the tourism industry. The third group, which had a large number of responses, provided extended explanations with correct examples.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Some students interpreted the question as an economic development issue rather than one that dealt with cultural landscapes. Therefore, they discussed such issues as employment and income. This may reflect some of the coverage of tourism in the textbooks.
- Other students answered the question as if it related to the diffusion of popular culture from the western nations. This clearly reflects some of the discussions in textbooks.
- Readers were pleased to see that a large number of students used their home landscapes and/or places they had visited to answer this question. Readers read some very good descriptions of examples.

- Students frequently did not make a descriptive or general statement about the process that was causing places to lose distinctiveness. For example, they did not say that tourist landscapes were becoming uniform, homogenous, or a synonym for those words.
- Similarly, students did not discuss the general process of preservation that enables places to maintain their distinctiveness.
- Students frequently focused on the process of diffusion of information about places via tourists. For example, they said that when a place became known by a large number of tourists it became less distinctive.
- Many students had trouble thinking about places at different scales and were unable to apply the term “region” to the question.
- Many students confused the spread of western popular cultural elements (e.g., McDonalds or Kentucky Fried Chicken into China and Russia) with the creation of a tourist landscape.

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?

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- Pay particular attention to the course’s key concepts (e.g, landscape, region, scale, and so on) as outlined in the *AP Human Geography Course Description: May 2004, 2005*. Relate case studies back to these geographic ideas.
- It is incumbent for students to make the most of the diverse materials they have acquired in the course in an exam setting. Build their confidence by stressing the interlinked nature of the course.
- Encourage students to develop accurate and contemporary examples for all sections of the course. Generally, and as previously noted, students used more sophisticated examples on this year’s exam when compared to those of previous years and scored points for doing so.
- Encourage students to develop successful tactics for responding to the “structured response” items in AP Human Geography textbooks. This includes answering questions in the way they are structured (points are allocated for subparts of the question and not for the overall answer as in some other subjects), dispensing with context-setting introductory paragraphs, and paying careful attention to the specific instruction (e.g., define, explain, discuss, and so on).
- Give students practice in writing 15- to 20-minute responses. Encourage them to read every word of a question carefully and then identify the key words in the question. About what “relationships” between these key ideas does the question ask?

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' depth of knowledge of a topic widely covered in college introductory human geography courses. It centered on a key concept in population geography, the demographic transition model. However, while knowledge of the model was essential for answering this question, students had to apply their knowledge of the model to the case of international migration. Thus, the question tested depth of knowledge of the demographic transition and push-pull factors of migration *and* gave students an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to apply geographic concepts across historic and geographic contexts.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.11 out of a possible six points. Responses scoring two or fewer points typically exhibited little understanding of the demographic transition; 62.9 percent of all responses fell in this category. The responses that fell in the middle score range of 3 and 4 points (29 percent) typically showed some limited knowledge of the model but a reticence to apply the model. Students who earned a score of 5 or 6 (8.2 percent of the total) demonstrated both an ability to apply the demographic transition and a depth of knowledge of how the model applies in contemporary Europe. Very few students (under 2 percent) earned all six points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Many students did not fully understand how the demographic transition is used as a model in geography.
- Some students were completely unfamiliar with the demographic transition.
- Most students did not connect aging to the demographic transition.
- Many students were uncomfortable connecting what they knew about changing labor markets from the economic development section of the course to what they knew about the later stages of the demographic transition. These students seemed to lack confidence in their own knowledge and/or abilities.
- Many students argued that North African migrants move to Europe because of Europe's better health care systems.
- Examples of push-pull migration factors were often very superficial (e.g., the role of food shortages and crop failure) or misplaced historically (e.g., answers referring to the bubonic plague and black death).
- Some students argued that India was located in North Africa.

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?

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- Discuss with your students how geographers use models.
- Impress upon your students how geographers like to think outside the box. That is, the AP Human Geography Exam often uses fresh scenarios students will not have encountered before to give them an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of key concepts.
- Encourage students to develop successful tactics for responding to the “structured response” items in AP Human Geography textbooks. This includes focusing on the key words in a prompt and answering questions in the way they are structured (points are allocated for subparts of the question and not for the overall answer as in some other subjects).
- Attend teaching workshops and use the AP Human Geography Electronic Discussion Group (EDG) to network with other AP Human Geography educators and the Development Committee.