



Student Performance Q&A: 2003 AP[®] Spanish Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Literature were written by the Chief Reader, Rita Goldberg of St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. 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: Poetry

What was the intent of this question?

This was the first of the three essays on the AP Spanish Literature Exam. Its intent was to assess students' ability to analyze and write about a poem they had not seen before. Although the other two essay questions have changed somewhat as a result of the implementation of the new reading list, the poetry essay remains the same. The poem this year was by Gabriel Celaya. Students were asked to analyze the contrast between the two worlds present in "Todas las mañanas cuando leo el periódico" and to discuss the poetic techniques used in the poem.

How well did students perform on this question?

The content mean score was 4.55 out of a possible nine points. The language mean score was 2.87 out of a possible five points. Both these scores were higher than last year. Many students found this poem quite accessible and were able to write well about it. Although the question did not explicitly ask students to link the use of poetic language and devices to the content of the poem, a significant number of students were able to address these accurately.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The problems students encountered included:

- giving an overall discussion of the poem or some of the details without focusing on the question;
- lack of an introduction or thesis statement;
- superficial commentary on the formal aspects of the poem, with a tendency to identify or list them without analysis;
- a tendency to be descriptive instead of analytic;
- misreading or not understanding the poem;
- poor organization;

- many grammar and vocabulary errors; and
- poor control of the conventions of the written language.

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 should focus on the question when analyzing the poem. They do not need to comment on every aspect of the poem, only those that pertain to the question.

When studying poetic devices, make sure students understand their role in poetry. Analyze specific poems in order to study how they are enhanced by particular devices. On the exam it is not necessary to list or describe all of the poetic devices used in a poem, only those that are relevant to the question.

Since the text for this essay and the topic are always new, students need guidance in how to approach an essay about a poem they have not seen before. Review with them responses to the poetry question from previous exams posted on AP Central™ (apcentral.collegeboard.com) and discuss why these essays were or were not successful.

Practice writing analytic essays about poetry. Students could write about a poem from a previous exam and then, with their teacher's help, use the rubric to evaluate their own work.

Study a large variety of poems during the year. Study other poems in addition to those on the reading list. Have students bring poems to class for analysis.

Provide students with specific vocabulary for writing about literature.

Help students prepare to write well-developed and well-organized essays by:

- teaching them how to make an outline of their ideas;
- practicing a list of expressions they can use to link ideas, sentences, and paragraphs;
- stressing the use of subordinate clauses in order to avoid simplistic sentences and excessive repetition; and
- practicing the writing of thesis statements that are not merely repetitions of the question and conclusions that are different from a simplistic summary of the preceding paragraphs.

Since language counts for 30 percent of the score of each essay, during the year work on grammar, vocabulary, and spelling as necessary. Language usage will probably improve in any case because of the amount of reading involved in the course.

Question 2: Thematic Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

This was a Type A thematic analysis question in which students were asked to select one story from a list of four by twentieth-century Latin American authors, describe the mix of fantasy and realism in the story, and consider its meaning in the story. (Type B questions involve discussing a theme in two works, either selecting two from a list provided on the exam or discussing the two specific works listed.)

How well did students perform on this question?

The content mean score for this question was 4.30 out of a possible nine points. The language mean score was 3.02 out of a possible five points. The mean score on this essay was higher than last year with fewer scores of 0. This means that a large number of the students who had read one of the stories were able to deal with the question adequately. Unfortunately, some students had not read any of the stories and so could not respond appropriately or at all. Some of these had, however, read other stories by García Márquez or Borges and wrote about them; these responses were not considered acceptable.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The problems students encountered included:

- an inability to deal with the question because of not having read at least one of the works;
- failure to deal adequately with the meaning of the commingling of fantasy and reality in the story;
- writing about a different story than one of those listed;
- providing a plot summary instead of analysis (literature essays should contain little or no plot summary; in fact, the essays that earn the highest scores consist almost totally of analysis);
- providing a very general response, with few specific links to the story selected;
- failure to provide a thesis statement or a clear introduction;
- poor organization; and
- many grammar and vocabulary errors.

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?

Make sure students read all of the works on the reading list.

Stress the importance of answering the question in the essay, not just writing in general terms about the selected work. When essays lack focus or the focus wanders, it is often because students have moved away from answering the question or from the thesis presented in the introductory paragraph.

Some students find it helpful to prepare a brief outline of their response.

Students will run out of time if they write out a complete draft and then copy it into the exam booklet. However, they should leave some time to reread and edit their work.

Implement the suggestions for Question 1 about essay writing in general.

Question 3: Text Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to discuss how the ideas in a quotation by Alonso Zamora Vicente on the picaresque novel apply to the *Lazarillo de Tormes*. This was a Type B question. That is, it involved analysis of critical commentary about a work from the required reading list. (Type A questions ask students to respond to two or three open-ended questions about an excerpt from one of the works on the reading list.)

How well did students perform on this question?

The content mean score was 4.4 out of a possible nine points. The language mean score was 2.93 out of a possible five points. Students who had read the *Lazarillo de Tormes* did so well on this essay that the mean score was higher than last year. On the other hand, a considerable number of students were unable to respond because they had not read the work, and there were many blank papers. Eight percent of the students earned a 0 on this question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The problems students encountered included:

- not having read the work,
- insufficient focus on the excerpt,
- a failure to link the ideas in the quote to the analysis of the *Lazarillo*,
- excessive plot summary and description,
- poor organization, and
- lack of a 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?

In this type of question, with a quote from a work on the reading list or a critical text, structuring the answer is usually more complex than it is for other types of questions. A good introduction and thesis are crucial in order to help students avoid getting lost in the details of the quote. However, commentary in the essay should be specific, not simply general references to the excerpt or to the work in question.

Have students practice jotting down brief notes on the main ideas of the quote, practice writing thesis statements and introductory paragraphs, and making an outline of their response. Stress the need to focus on analysis, not plot summary.

Select additional representative critical passages and have students write an outline of the main ideas they would develop in an essay. There are many examples of this type of question on previous literature exams.

Implement the suggestions for Question 1 about essay writing in general.