



Student Performance Q&A:

2003 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Diane 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: DBQ

What was the intent of this question?

This three-part document-based question (DBQ) required students to analyze the New Deal, assess its effectiveness, and discuss how it changed the role of government.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.54 out of a possible nine points. Overall, students performed well and the question discriminated well. This is a mainstream topic that was clearly worded yet constructed in such a way that it was a complex question. Student performances reflected these realities, as there were a large number of solid essays and the top-ranging papers were extremely well written. There were also a large number of students who did poorly on the question because they focused entirely on the documents and failed to provide contextual information or a perspective.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students conceded to the common myth that the New Deal was successful and Franklin D. Roosevelt pulled the nation out of the Great Depression. Outside information was lacking in the weaker essays and well into the middle-range essays. Sense of chronology clearly separated the more able students from the less able ones. The better students had a sense of progression and demonstrated this very well. The Schechter case and the Leseuer documents were the least used and most misinterpreted. Students' use of the Berryman cartoon indicated they did not handle metaphor well, though many students used the cartoon to address some of the New Deal programs and argued that it was a shift from previous policy. Many essays did not provide a historical context for the documents, and some students did not handle opposing viewpoints represented in the documents very well.

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 be reminded that the purpose of any DBQ is to engender an analysis of documents and not simply to provide a narrative that connects the various documents together. It was encouraging to see a clear thesis statement even in the weaker essays. However, it is important that students develop their thesis throughout the essay. It would be useful to remind students that they should begin with a clear thesis statement and develop it throughout the body of their essay (i.e., the analysis of documents should be done in a way that is consistent with the thesis statement). Finally, students should be urged to discuss the documents in connection with one another whenever possible, rather than in discrete paragraphs (the proverbial “laundry list” approach).

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This straightforward question asked students to evaluate the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the government under the Articles of Confederation. It assessed students’ understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the government during the Critical Period of U.S. history, 1777–1789.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students could choose between Question 2 and Question 3. The combined mean score for Questions 2 and 3 was 3.23 out of a possible nine points. Generally, students performed better on this question than they did on other free-response questions because the topic was concise and the time period limited. Students generally knew that a limited government had been created in response to the colonists’ experiences with England, and they knew many of the key provisions of the Articles (e.g., each state had one vote), though the specifics often eluded them. In particular, the great majority of students knew about the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Students generally knew about Shays’ Rebellion but did not always cite many details. Some students did use subsequent events to read back into the 1780s to detail some of the weaknesses. Not infrequently students focused on the weaknesses and strengths *during* the 1780s to make the argument that the Articles were a steppingstone to the Constitution or a learning period preparatory to the Philadelphia Convention.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students did not always distinguish between the power to tax and the power to make requisitions from the states or the power to request troops from the states. Most frequently, there was little concrete information regarding diplomacy, such as the fact that the government under the Articles negotiated the Treaty of Paris, ending the Revolution, or that it did, in fact, negotiate commercial treaties with several European countries. Students frequently did not know that there were a number of limitations on state power and that they did not retain all their sovereignty, such as with respect to international affairs. A fairly common error was to see the Articles as an early form of democracy rather than a league of states. Other common errors were to focus on the debates between Federalists and Anti-Federalists concerning the adoption of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

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 need to have a clear sense of chronology that carefully defines time periods and the major changes that help to define those periods. It is vital that they learn to ask themselves if what they are considering and planning to write correctly addresses the period under consideration in the questions. Also, because the experience with the Articles was so profoundly important in shaping how those who met in Philadelphia designed the Constitution, teachers should reinforce to students that the Articles of Confederation and the 1780s constitute a significant period in U.S. history.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to examine developments in transportation from 1820–1860 and how those developments impacted economic and social change. The question tested students’ knowledge of both transportation developments and economic and social change. Students could write about a variety of transportation options, though the most common were railroads, canals, and steamboats.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students could choose between Question 2 and Question 3. The combined mean score for Questions 2 and 3 was 3.23 out of a possible nine points. Overall, responses were weaker than they have been in past years. Sixty percent of the students chose to answer this question, and a large number of them performed poorly. There were numerous essays that provided mere generalizations about transportation and economic and social change. Many essays were totally out of the time period. Many students failed to take a historical approach, using relevant historical information specific to the time period. The result was that many essays contained a good deal of generic information that could have reflected any time frame (e.g., towns grew, goods got cheaper, travel was faster).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Essays had little analysis with minimal or no explanation of why and how developments in transportation brought about economic and social change. Many essays were merely descriptive. A number of essays included historical information outside the time period (e.g., transcontinental railroad, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford). Essays tended to have a more limited discussion of social change than economic change, and they sometimes confused what constitutes social change. Students interpreted social change as “social life.” Essays tended to be weak on chronology, and they treated the time period monolithically. Essays were often imprecise in their terminology of the various regions of the country during 1820–1860. Students treated the South as backward and/or devoid of transportation developments. Few students integrated social impact into their essays.

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 need to learn how to conceptualize a question, formulate a thesis, and then support their response with specific, historical facts. The introduction of thematic concepts over time in the classroom might help students better conceptualize a question such as this one. Students continue to perform poorly on questions requiring social and economic analysis, and this points to the need for better integration of social history in the AP curriculum.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to examine the impact of the Civil War on the political and economic developments in the two regions they selected, focusing on the time period extending to the end of the nineteenth century. Students needed to demonstrate their knowledge of the impact of the Civil War on the political and economic developments in those regions during that time period, citing specific factual information to support their assertions. This question expected student responses to show an understanding that extended beyond the dates of the Reconstruction period. The intent, therefore, was to have students go beyond a simple recounting of a chronology of events by effectively evaluating the impact of the Civil War on the political and economic developments in the two regions they selected through the end of the nineteenth century.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students could choose between Question 4 and Question 5. The combined mean scores for Questions 4 and 5 was 3.25 out of a possible nine points. Forty-eight percent chose to answer this question. In comparison to past free-response questions, and those given this year, it appears that students performed not quite as well this year as they did last.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was seen in essays that did not go beyond the dates of Reconstruction, despite the fact that the question asked students to focus on the time period 1865–1900. Students seemed to misunderstand the intent of the question in that regard. Some essays focused instead on why the South lost the Civil War, the causes of the Civil War, or, less frequently, a recounting of the relative strengths of the North and the South during the Civil War. Another common problem was the lack of balance in the essays between the political or economic developments or between the regions. There seemed to be a misunderstanding on the part of students of General Sherman’s March to the Sea involving the type and extent of the destruction and the geographical area covered by Sherman and his troops. Some students did not address the impact of the Civil War or make a connection as to how the Civil War affected the region, politically and economically, during the time period. They simply recounted a list of people or events, some of which were not in the time period at all.

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 learn to analyze the question in order to be able to better address what they are being asked to do. The skills of analytical writing — which include presentation of a strong thesis statement that addresses the question, clear examples and details that support the thesis, clear writing, and a conclusion that brings it all together — are important skills for students to master. Teachers may want to move beyond the textbook in teaching AP U.S. History in order to better prepare their students for the analytical and written communication skills they need to perform well on the exam.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to elicit students' knowledge about and understanding of U.S. society in the two time periods indicated (the 1920s and the 1950s) in relation to the areas of race relations, the role of women, and/or consumerism.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students could choose between Question 4 and Question 5. The combined mean score for Questions 4 and 5 was 3.25 out of a possible nine points. Students who selected this question seemed to have a better basic knowledge and, on the whole, tended to do better than last year. The responses were generally longer than has been the norm on the third of the three exam questions, as even students who knew very little wrote something about the categories and/or time periods.

Although readers were looking for similarities and differences in the two time periods in the two categories selected by the students, the comparisons/contrasts in this question could be approached either categorically or by time periods. Students tended to perceive the first category from a political perspective and the last two from more of a social perspective, which made for some interesting comparisons.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students leaned toward generalities in the areas of women and consumerism. Although there was a balance in the selection of all three categories, it was determined that students had more difficulty in coming up with factual support in the areas of consumerism and the role of women than in race relations. As a result, students often "stretched" for linear connections, which resulted in information (especially in the role of women) that was often out of the time period. Common problems were factual errors on the amendments, temperance, suffrage for black males and women coming in the 1950s, and a common belief that all women in the 1920s were flappers.

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 need to learn to write a definitive thesis that addresses all aspects of the question. Teachers might focus on what it means to compare and contrast with supporting and factual evidence, including causality and chronology.