



Student Performance Q&A:
2006 AP[®] English Language and Composition
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2006 free-response questions for AP[®] English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David Jolliffe of the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, with contributions from three Question Leaders for this year's AP Exam: Gary Hatch of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah; Mary Rigsby of the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia; and Lawrence Scanlon of Brewster High School in Brewster, New York. This document provides an overview of each free-response question and offers a description 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 called for interpretation and analysis of contemporary prose. Students read an excerpt from “The Plastic Pink Flamingo: A Natural History,” an article originally published in the *American Scholar*. In this piece, the author, Jennifer Price, examines the emergence of the plastic pink flamingo as a cultural icon in the United States during the 1950s. Students were asked to analyze how Price crafts the text to reveal her view of United States culture.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.31 out of a possible 9 points. The most successful students were able to see the nuances of Price's view on the relationship between a simple material object—the plastic pink flamingo—and the growth of a consumerist culture. In addition, these successful students were able to demonstrate how the complexity and sophistication of Price's prose embodies her position. They correctly identified her attitude as whimsical, amused, playfully mocking, and mildly critical. They understood that Price presents both sides of the American dream and that her essay operates on at least two levels: her overtly amusing and informative history of pink flamingos, and her more subtle critique of culture that operates through her use of the plastic bird as a symbol.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students whose responses fell into the lower half of the scoring range frequently misunderstood both the text itself and the task presented to them. They generally gave oversimplified interpretations of the original text, which provided a complex view of the relationship between plastic pink flamingos and United States culture in the 1950s. They often veered from the task of analysis, offering commentary, some of it imprecise, about United States history and culture from the 1920s to the present. In some instances, they simply mentioned or listed rhetorical strategies without adequately connecting them to the craft of the text.

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 students' performance on question 1 suggests that teachers might concentrate on two aspects in their courses. First, students clearly need to learn how to read erudite, complex analytic and argumentative prose that is published in contemporary magazines and journals. Essays such as Price's are regularly included in anthologies used in first-year writing courses at colleges and universities, and students must learn how to analyze the sophisticated thought and form of such essays. Second, students need to understand more deeply how the organization, structure, diction, and syntax of a piece of contemporary American nonfiction prose—especially one which, like Price's, uses narration as a mode of development—manifest and flesh out the text's meaning and purpose.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question called for students to perform a rhetorical analysis of a passage of archaic prose—that is, prose composed before the beginning of the twentieth century. The question directed students to read carefully an excerpt of William Hazlitt's 1827 essay, "On the Want of Money," and to analyze the rhetorical strategies the author uses to develop his position about money.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.96 out of a possible 9 points. Successful essays not only explained the position Hazlitt develops about money but also analyzed in some detail how the organization, structure, diction, syntax, figurative language, and even rhythm of the piece manifest that position. The successful papers recognized Hazlitt's appeals to emotion and appreciated his somber and then ironic—and ultimately humorous—tone. As one Table Leader, Steve Heller, wrote: "More effective responses understood Hazlitt's message on poverty from multiple perspectives: while material comfort is essential, at what point does our perceived lack of money dictate our life's work?—an appropriate question for today's teens."

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most frequent errors resulted from students' difficulty with reading and understanding archaic prose in general and one of Hazlitt's constructions in particular. Concerning the latter: a great many students misread Hazlitt's use of *want*—employed as a noun in the title and as a verb in the passage—as meaning a *desire*, rather than a *lack*. This misreading, then, led to faulty

interpretations of the meaning and purpose of the text, and these misinterpretations, in turn, interfered with the students' efforts at rhetorical analysis. Students who earned scores in the lower half of the scoring range—even those who read Hazlitt's prose accurately—generally showed little success at understanding the central concepts and terminology of rhetorical theory and analyzing how Hazlitt's strategies and techniques flesh out the meaning and effect of the text.

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 can take away three lessons from students' performance on this question. First, we must teach our students to comprehend archaic prose. In general education courses and courses throughout their majors, college students are frequently required to understand texts written before the twentieth century. In particular, teachers could help students learn to identify the meaning of terms in context in archaic texts. This passage presented students with contextual clues to help them determine the author's use of the term *want*, but they often ignored these clues. Second, we need to teach our students about rhetorical theory and rhetorical analysis. Students need to use and understand such concepts as audience, purpose, and occasion; tone; establishment of the central contention; appeals to the author's character and credibility and to the audience's emotions; organization and structure; and diction, syntax, imagery, and figurative language. Third, and most important, we must teach our students to analyze the unity of argumentative texts: the way their form follows their function, and the ways their features of organization, structure, form, and style relate to and support their establishment of meaning, purpose, and effect.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question called for students to write a clear, cogent, and compelling argument. They were directed to develop a position on the value of public statements of opinion. The question prompted students to consider such sources as talk radio, television shows, popular magazines, and Web blogs. It also suggested that they think about the roles played by ordinary citizens, political figures, and entertainers, among those who express their opinions publicly on a wide range of topics. Are these opinions worthwhile? Does the expression of such opinions foster democratic values?

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.33 out of a possible 9 points. Students who succeeded with this question demonstrated that they had read widely about current events and were aware of the ubiquity and increasing density of public communication. They apparently understood that their reader's perspective may be different from their own, so they provided a description of the logic that generated their opinions, offered specific evidence from many realms of public media and discourse, and developed that evidence by providing abundant details, not relying on readers to fill in the gaps. These students gave evidence of being self-aware—their positions were consciously chosen, considered carefully, and emerged from their own reading, experience, and observation.

What were common student errors or omissions?

For students receiving lower scores on this question, the challenge lay in the degree to which they could fully articulate a position and make the reasonableness of that position transparent with well-chosen and elaborated illustrations and explanations. Such essays in general relied on repetition to fill their pages, rather than elaboration and specific details. A great many of these essays were dominated by circular thinking—i.e., public expression of opinions is good because it’s good that everyone expresses opinions. The least successful responses were those by students who seemed perplexed by the assigned task. These students vigorously denied that other people’s opinions held any significance, or they expressed with certainty that only the opinions of authorities were valuable, or they asserted that they were interested only in their own opinions. Finally, some of the lowest-scoring responses substituted a simpler task. Instead of analyzing and assessing the value of public statements of opinion, they simply took a position on a public issue. These responses focused on such controversial topics as immigration reform, gay marriage, abortion, and in one case the production of ethanol. While these essays were occasionally interesting in their own right, unfortunately they were not responses to the task presented in question 3.

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?

Student performance on question 3 also suggests three pedagogical directions for teachers. First, we need to teach our students to read and write authoritatively about a range of current topics that engage the attention of well-educated people. Such abilities come into play not only in the course of earning a college degree but also in the practice of fulfilling one’s role as a responsible, active, contributing citizen. Second, we need to teach our students to write essays that thoughtfully interact with their audience, that acknowledge readers might not immediately share the writer’s values and beliefs, that accommodate these differing beliefs with appropriate explanation and evidence, and that make the logic of their argument transparent and clear. Third, we need to teach our students how to find appropriate evidence for public discussions of current events and issues, recognizing that the literary works one reads for a course—fiction, poetry, and drama—might not always provide the best evidence to support claims about issues in the public eye.