



Student Performance Q&A:

2006 AP[®] Spanish Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2006 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Language were written by the Chief Reader, Gwyn E. Campbell of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. 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.

Part A: Writing (Paragraph Completion and Fill-ins)

What was the intent of this question?

This is the section of the exam that deals with specific aspects of language usage and discrete language items in context. The answers must be completely accurate in order to be correct and earn 1 point each for a total possible score of 20.

Part A consists of one paragraph, this year about a young man who awoke in a garden while his two companions slept on. As directed in the instructions in Spanish and English, the 10 blanks of the paragraph-completion section require a one-word answer that is the correct form of the root word provided in parentheses. Items on this year's exam included three verb tenses, the use of one infinitive, one adverb, several adjectives, definite and indefinite articles, an adverb, and a conjunction.

Part B, the fill-ins, contains 10 separate sentences that must be completed with the correct form and tense of the infinitive given in parentheses. More than a one-word answer is possible. This year's items included a direct command, one verb in the future tense, at least three uses of the subjunctive including the present, past, and pluperfect, one possible conditional perfect, one preterit, the use of an infinitive after *al*, and the use of a gerund.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 10.01 out of a possible 20 points, and that for the Total Group was 10.96. Compared with the 2005 mean scores for this section of the exam—8.90 for the Standard Group and 9.51 for the Total Group—the scores for both groups were more than 1 point higher on the 2006 exam, with a particularly notable 1.45-point increase for the Total Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

At times students supplied more than one possible answer, but in such cases *both* answers had to be completely correct in order to receive credit. Frequent errors occurred in spelling and the use of accents, primarily omitting them as opposed to adding an accent where it did not belong. Question 14 (*habrá*), for example, required the written accent, as did the auxiliary verb for all three possible correct answers for question 19 (*habríamos comenzado*, *hubiéramos comenzado*, or *hubiésemos comenzado*). Although the opening words of the paragraph-completion passage showed an example of a preposition plus infinitive, some students did not use the infinitive after the preposition *sin* in question 9. Similarly, others were not alert to the use of the infinitive after the preposition *al* in question 13 (*volver* or *haber vuelto*). Failure to provide the correct preterit form of *-ir* stem-changing verbs, as in question 16 (*se durmieron*), or verbs with an irregular preterit stem, as in questions 6 and 7 (*hizo* and *puso*, respectively), were common mistakes. In addition, the formation of the subjunctive of the *-cir* verbs in question 12 (*introduzca*) and question 15 (*tradujera*, *tradujese*, *hubiera traducido*, or *hubiese traducido*) was problematic for some students. Others supplied the correct future stem of the verb *haber* in question 14 (*habrá*), but they used the third-person plural instead of singular. A number of students could not correctly produce the present subjunctive form of *caber* in question 17 (*quepan*). The use of the gerund (*evitando* or *habiendo evitado*) in question 20 proved difficult for certain students, as did the formation of the adverb (*ruidosamente*) in question 2, for which *ruidosos* was also scored as a correct answer. A number of students used the masculine plural definite article for question 4 (*las* being the correct answer), and for question 5, many wrote either *y* or *o* instead of the correct answer (*e*).

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?

When students have the opportunity to practice this type of exercise on a routine basis in class, they tend to be more successful with this portion of the writing component on the exam. Doing so under the same conditions and time constraints of the exam is also very useful. Students should read the instructions carefully. For the first 10 questions, for example, only a one-word answer was allowed, whereas in the second set of questions, the correct form of the verb could be, and often was, more than a one-word answer.

The most effective strategy for students to employ in the paragraph-completion questions is to first read through the passage in its entirety in order to understand the context before writing anything in the spaces provided. Likewise, for the 10 verb fill-ins, each sentence should be read completely before any answers are attempted. Furthermore, even if the correct answer is identical to the prompt (as in question 13), students still must write that word on the corresponding line. Blank spaces are always scored as incorrect, so it is in students' best interest to provide an educated guess instead of writing no answer at all.

* The Standard Group does not include students who speak the language at home or who have lived for more than one month in a country where Spanish is the native language. Decisions on cutoff scores are based on the Standard Group.

In addition, practice with the following written skills is generally helpful:

- Accents must be written correctly, clearly, and directly over the vowels to which they apply. When students understand the division of words into Spanish syllables and the guidelines for where the stress normally falls, they are better equipped to use accents correctly.
- Orthographical changes: It is important for students to learn the rules for spelling changes, as evidenced in the correct answer to question 12.
- Verb conjugations: It can be useful to make students routinely identify the stem for the tense in question. Teachers could provide more practice with verbs that have an irregular stem in the preterit, future, and/or conditional tenses as well.
- Use of the subjunctive (including as indirect commands)
- Formation of direct commands
- Agreement, noun–adjective and subject–verb
- Sequencing of verb tenses

Part A: Writing (Composition)

What was the intent of this question?

The essay question is designed to elicit a formal and well-organized composition of at least 200 words. This year’s prompt began by referring to exchange programs for or with students from other countries. Students were asked to imagine their school’s need for such a program and to explain (*justifica*) the reasons for establishing an exchange program and how it would function, as well the qualities (*las cualidades*) that the student participants should exhibit.

How well did students perform on this question?

This year the mean score for the Standard Group was 4.56 out of a possible 9 points, and for the Total Group it was 5.04. The mean scores for both groups showed a slight increase compared with the mean scores received for the composition question on the 2005 exam (4.22 for the Standard Group and 4.79 for the Total Group).

What were common student errors or omissions?

The topic this year was accessible to students in that the vocabulary required to complete the task was within their reach. There were, however, students who were unable to, or who simply did not, fully address the question. The subject did lead to some conceptual misunderstandings for students who misinterpreted the meaning of the term *programa de intercambio*. Readers encountered compositions in which it was variously considered to refer to: (1) a presentation, such as one that might occur at a high school assembly; (2) an educational or cultural program, such as one that might be used to assist new arrivals to this country from abroad; (3) an exchange of products or information via the Internet; or (4) a student trip abroad. Conceptually, then, the idea of an exchange of pupils from two different cultures was at times beyond the grasp of some students. The level of language needed to respond to this prompt was perhaps not as sophisticated as that required in previous years. There may have been slightly fewer scores in the higher ranges as a result, although the mean score for both groups was slightly improved this year, as detailed above.

Other common errors on this year’s exam included the following:

- Not addressing the prompt in full and/or excessive repetition
- Poor organization in light of the different items requested in the prompt
- Lack of an introduction or thesis statement
- Lack of transitional words within or between paragraphs
- Weak or repetitious conclusion
- Use of very basic vocabulary and verb tenses

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?

It is helpful for students to have practice with this type of formal essay writing, including the prewriting phase, throughout the year in circumstances similar to those of the actual exam. Doing so enables students to better understand the mechanics of a good formal essay and to gain a clear idea of what a solid 200-word composition resembles. Although there is no fixed format that this piece of writing must follow, teachers can help students become accustomed to writing a thesis statement or introduction, to then developing the paragraphs or ideas in a well-organized fashion, and to writing a conclusion that does not merely sum up the preceding content. Students who make a habit of spending five minutes thinking through the topic and outlining their answers and/or individual paragraphs generally tend to have higher scores.

Of course, students should read every word of the prompt to make certain that they address the question fully. Through routine practice in class they should be able to move beyond a basic vocabulary and employ a richer lexicon; idiomatic expressions and advanced structures, such as the subjunctive; and a variety of verb tenses. Reading good Spanish prose from a variety of sources on a regular basis can also help students widen their vocabulary and ideas, thereby making them better able to respond to any question with a well-organized and thoughtful essay. Finally, an essay that includes personal examples often allows students to feel comfortable with whatever prompt they encounter, which in turn can lead to an improvement in the overall quality of their compositions.

Part B: Speaking (Picture Sequence)

What was the intent of this question?

This part of the exam is designed to elicit a narration of the story suggested by a series of six drawings. Students have two minutes in which to demonstrate their oral ability by telling the story as they interpret it. They are expected to use a variety of vocabulary and structures. Fluency and pronunciation are also taken into consideration. This year the picture sequence showed a young girl who finds a stray cat and brings it home to her parents. Some weeks later, she sees a poster offering a reward for returning the cat to its owners. The sequence ends with her returning the cat to the family and arriving home with three kittens, to the surprise of her parents.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this year's Standard Group was 5.18 out of a possible 9 points; for the Total Group it was 7.02. Both groups showed a slight increase over the mean scores earned on the picture sequence for the 2005 exam, which were 4.98 for the Standard Group and 6.87 for the Total Group.

The question was appropriate for the particular age group and was within the context of the students' own experience. The majority of the responses conveyed that students were comfortable with the necessary vocabulary required to relate the story and that they could identify well with it. Although the essential vocabulary consisted of very common words (*cat, to find, parents, angry, to allow, poster, photograph*), the drawings did not necessarily seem to lead to much creativity on the students' part. The pictures allowed them to use the language in a variety of tenses: past, present, future, conditional, and the subjunctive mood. Nonetheless, the idea of the reward sign (*Recompensa*) in the fourth drawing created some original interpretations. Students' responses included, for instance, mention of the lost cat having been pregnant; the young girl's purchase of the kittens with the \$50 reward; or the bonus of receiving three kittens in addition to the reward money. This allowed students the opportunity, as well, to broaden their lexicon when narrating the closing pictures in the sequence. In general, the series worked well, as there were no misinterpretations of the pictures.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As in previous years, a number of students told the story very quickly and without enhancement—that is, without a thorough, detailed, or rich narration. The goal of the picture sequence is to relate the story as fully as possible within the allotted time. The recorded directions explain in both English and Spanish that students have two minutes to think about the six pictures and two minutes to relate their interpretation of the story. For this reason, 1 point was deducted from student responses of less than one minute. No points were deducted from the scores of students who filled the two minutes with good detail and fluency but who nonetheless did not complete the story.

Again, some students did not tell a story but merely went from picture to picture. However, fewer students simply described each individual drawing in the sequence ("*En el primer dibujo ... en el segundo dibujo,*" for example), as too many had done on previous years' exams. The few students who chose to follow the old practice of a frame-by-frame description with no master narrative did not demonstrate an adequate variety of structures and/or a good range of vocabulary. Many students were successful in their efforts at circumlocution to explain the sign that read *Recompensa*. On the other hand, in some cases the narration broke down owing to lack of sufficient vocabulary resources, and the scoring reflected that fact.

In many instances, action words (verbs) predominated. For this reason, in some student responses the story was told directly, in the sense that the overall narration lacked correct transitional words and phrases. In other cases, frequent errors in both vocabulary and structure, along with anglicisms, hindered the Readers' comprehension of the narrated tale. In a smaller number of cases, the student's poor pronunciation forced some interpretation and again affected the score.

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?

It is always profitable for students to hear and read, throughout the AP course, original sources representing all Spanish-speaking countries. AP Central contains many such resource materials. Additional authentic sources for listening comprehension include films, documentaries, speeches, and interviews. In addition, teachers should help their students learn to synthesize and elaborate, as well as to paraphrase and cite. In order for students to master these techniques, it is very important to teach them high-frequency vocabulary, transitional words and phrases, and a variety of idiomatic expressions, as well as to review them often.

It is also important for students to practice the picture-sequence question during the course of the year and to do so in a situation that simulates the AP Exam environment. This helps to familiarize the students with the format of the exam. Students who routinely undertake similar narration exercises in class generally earn higher scores than those who do not. In addition, it is essential that students, teachers, and proctors be familiar with the recording equipment prior to the day of the actual exam.

AP policy prevents AP Spanish teachers from proctoring the AP Spanish Language Exam. Therefore, they need to work with school authorities and the proctor to prevent distractions while students are recording. Proctors should be familiar with the mechanics of this part of the exam. For instance, some students stop and start the machines while recording, perhaps in order to have longer to think and to formulate their answers. Stopping and starting the recording equipment is not allowed and can result in an investigation of a suspected security violation and delay of scores. More and more schools now record the student responses on compact discs as opposed to tapes. Schools should consult the *AP Coordinator's Manual* and the AP Central Web site several months prior to the administration of the exam. In this way they can best ensure that students' responses will be recorded properly and therefore scored properly.

Part B: Speaking (Directed Responses)

What was the intent of this question?

In the directed-response section of the speaking portion of the exam, students are asked five questions that create a simulated conversation on a single topic. The topic this year was sadness. The challenge for students increases with each question, as they become progressively more complex in terms of content and language. In general, these five questions usually include a command, an opinion to be explained or defended, and a hypothetical situation requiring the use of the subjunctive in the students' answers.

How well did students perform on this question?

The topic was very accessible to the students, and most were therefore able to understand and answer the questions. The mean score for the Standard Group was 10.42 out of 20 possible points (4 points for each question), and the mean score for the Total Group was 14.90. Compared with last year's mean results—11.69 for the Standard Group and 15.34 for the Total Group—the mean for the Standard Group dropped by more than 1 full point, and that for the Total Group declined slightly as well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students understood most of the questions and handled them well. Question 1 fostered both originality and personalization of the question. Students addressed this question both directly and indirectly. The prompt ending with the request for a justification (*explica tu respuesta*) helped them to develop a thorough response. Question 2 allowed for a wide and varied use of vocabulary, very much in tune with the electronic age in which students live. Question 3 was a bit troublesome for most students. Many had difficulty in answering a question about the future, which required the use of the conditional tense. Question 4, which instructed students to give advice to a friend, could be handled as both a direct command and an indirect command. Both were acceptable forms of addressing the prompt. Question 5 elicited the greatest number of weak responses. The two verbs—*intentar* and *aliviar*—were problematic for many students, who indirectly answered the question by focusing only on the importance of the happiness of others. This perhaps accounts for the decrease in mean scores when compared with the scores for this section on the 2005 exam.

Additional problems and errors included the following:

- Failure to use the entire 20 seconds available to answer each question thoroughly
- Labored and/or halting expression
- Limited range of vocabulary
- Lack of ability to answer a question through circumlocution
- Poor pronunciation
- Lack of a control of such basic structures as verb conjugations, subject–verb and adjective–noun agreement, gender of nouns, and possessive adjectives

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?

It is important to expose the students to a variety of voices, speakers, and accents. Such routine practice will help them to deal with any unfamiliar voices or accents heard during the directed-response portion of the exam. Even where there is no local Spanish radio or TV station, the Internet offers many free resources, including radio and a large variety of video materials. Several Spanish-language TV channels are also available on the Internet.

Teachers can certainly also help improve performance on this section by working with students to master verbs, vocabulary, and expressions or phrases beyond the most basic level of the lexicon. Students should understand that in order to receive some credit, they should say something relevant to the respective questions, no matter how brief.

See also the comments under this question in the picture sequence section, above, concerning the importance of practice and familiarity with the recording equipment for students and proctors.