



Student Performance Q&A:

2006 AP® Spanish Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2006 free-response questions for AP® Spanish Literature 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.

Question 1: Poetry Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

This question assesses students' ability to write an essay analyzing the way in which a given theme is treated in a poem that is not on the required reading list for the course. On this year's exam, the selection was "*La araña*," a five-stanza poem by César Vallejo. Students were asked to analyze the theme of suffering in the poem and to discuss the poet's use of language and poetic devices to communicate this theme.

How well did students perform on this question?

Each of the three essay questions constitutes 20 percent of the total exam score. Each question receives two separate scores. The first, for the content of the analysis, counts for 70 percent of the essay's score; the second, for language, counts for 30 percent.

This year for question 1, the mean score for content for the Standard Group* was 4.52 out of a possible 9 points; for the Total Group it was 4.37. Compared with mean scores on the 2005 exam—5.33 for the Standard Group and 5.10 for the Total Group—this year's scores were significantly lower for both groups. The mean scores for the content of question 1 were the highest of the three questions for both groups on the 2005 exam, but this year the Standard Group received the lowest mean content score of all three questions on question 1.

* 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 Total Group.

With respect to the language scores, the mean score for the Standard Group was 3.24 out of a possible 5 points; for the Total Group the mean score was 3.48. The mean language scores for both groups were almost half a point lower than the mean language scores for this question in 2005 (3.69 for the Standard Group and 3.94 for the Total Group).

The poem selected for the poetry-analysis question this year was short. Its form and content—including vocabulary, poetic syntax, and imagery—were very accessible to students. Although the theme of suffering may be an abstract one, the poem made it concrete by focusing on the figure of the spider as described by the first-person poetic voice.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As directed in the prompt, students were required to analyze the theme of suffering and the manner in which poetic devices and language were used to reflect that theme. The inclusion of specific examples from the poem was also a part of the task. Responses with a clear and well-developed thesis that also included these textual references to support the analysis earned points in the high range of scores. Essays in the midrange of scores were not as well developed, did not analyze the theme explicitly, and/or contained some errors of analysis. Those in the lower range tended to lack focus, and description outweighed analysis; they often included incorrect statements and did not support the thesis.

Errors of omission related to the requirements of the question included the following:

- Discussing the theme of suffering without focusing on the question and/or the poem itself
- Paraphrasing the poem in a descriptive essay
- Listing poetic devices present in the poem and even defining the devices themselves without integrating them into an analysis of how they communicated the poem's theme
- Failing to include specific textual references
- Failing to mention form (e.g., the differing stanzas themselves or the development of the theme in each progressive stanza) as related to the poem's content

General issues related to essay writing included the following:

- Lack of an introduction or thesis statement
- Poor development of the analysis
- Weak conclusions, such as one that merely repeated the opening statement or summarized the previous paragraphs
- Lack of organization

Common language problems included the following:

- Frequent grammatical errors
- Limited vocabulary
- Spelling errors, including accent marks

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 poetry question appears on the exam every year. Although the poem does not come from the required reading list, students do have the advantage of having the text before them while they plan and write their responses. By reading new poems and practicing ways to respond to this type of prompt under conditions and constraints that are similar to those of the exam, students refine their skills and become better able to produce a well-developed and coherent treatment of the question. Teachers can further help by showing their students how to explain their ideas clearly, so the Readers are not left to infer the points students have made. They can also help their students understand the difference between analysis and description.

Although the instructions for this question did not specifically suggest that students set aside a few minutes to read the question, think about the topic, and outline a response, this is a useful technique for them to practice. Their planning process should begin with a careful and thorough reading of the entire question or prompt. Teachers might wish to direct their students to underline or circle each part of the question (e.g., how the theme of suffering is presented, how the poetic devices are used to reflect this theme) in order to better ensure that they address the entire question. Students also benefit from reserving a few minutes of the allotted time to proofread, correct, and/or edit their work.

As part of their preparation for answering the question and to help them better outline their essays, students can be taught to read through the poem carefully, making note of the forms, poetic devices, and rhyme that support the poem's theme as indicated in the prompt. It is important to analyze these poetic devices and integrate comments on their usage into the essay instead of merely listing them. In order to develop students' ability to notice and understand the manner in which such devices are used, an effective classroom strategy is for teachers to discuss poetic devices and language in the context of actual poems and explore how they serve to communicate ideas, feelings, and so on.

The key to students' success with this question is the ability to write well-developed, well-organized, and well-documented essays. Teachers can help by doing the following:

- Give students writing practice in class with all aspects of essay composition: prewriting, outlining, writing, and editing.
- Involve small groups or the entire class in the prewriting phase of the process to enable students to share collectively their thoughts concerning the poem's theme, the poetic language and devices employed, and the form of the poem.
- Teach students how to better identify poetic devices and their effects.
- Teach students how to write effective thesis statements and conclusions.
- Teach students how to develop and properly support their ideas in the analysis.
- Help students learn how to stay on the topic by pointing out superfluous or irrelevant commentaries in their work and showing how these detract from the overall quality of the analysis.
- Teach students to distinguish analysis from mere paraphrasing or plot summary.
- Encourage students to write more than one draft of an essay on any given poem.
- Develop and practice a list of vocabulary, expressions, and transitional phrases in order to link sentences and paragraphs while integrating comments of an analytical nature.

Readers assess both the content and language in the students' responses to the poetry-analysis question (as they do for the other two essay questions on this exam). When evaluating student work, teachers should also provide feedback in both of these areas. It is also helpful for students to be familiar with the scoring guidelines for the questions on the AP Exam. These guidelines, along with all the free-response questions from previous years, are available on AP Central® (<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com>). By working with question 1 from released free-response questions, students can gain valuable practice at poetic analysis. The sample student responses and accompanying scoring commentaries can help them evaluate their own essays, whether as a class or in small peer groups.

Question 2: Thematic Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

In the thematic analysis, two types of questions are possible: one type involves the comparison of a given theme or topic in two works from the required reading list; the second type is an analysis of a given theme in one work from the reading list. This year's question was of the former type. Students were asked to write an essay comparing the treatment of social criticism in two works chosen from a list of four titles: García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, Vodanovic's *El delantal blanco*, "Un día de éstos" by García Márquez, and *Lazarillo de Tormes* by an anonymous author.

How well did students perform on this question?

For the Standard Group, this year's mean content score was 4.98 out of a possible 9 points, a decrease from the 5.25 scored by this group on the 2005 exam. For the Total Group, the mean content score earned this year was 4.75, very close to the 4.85 obtained on the 2005 exam. The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.27 on a 5-point scale, very similar to the group's mean score of 3.22 on the 2005 exam. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.48, virtually identical to the mean language score of 3.50 that this group received on the 2005 exam.

For both groups, question 2 received the highest mean content and mean language scores of the three questions on the 2006 exam. (For the Total Group, the mean language score of 3.48 was the same mean language score earned on question 1.) Clearly, the four works listed in the question were familiar to most students and offered a good selection from which to choose.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors and omissions included the following:

- Inability to deal with the theme of social criticism and/or to compare its treatment in two works
- Superficial development of the theme and/or the comparison
- Excessive plot summary and minimal analysis
- Insufficient supporting examples from the chosen texts
- General or vague responses that suggested students were not familiar with the works
- Superfluous and/or erroneous statements
- Poor organization or limited ability to write a well-developed essay

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?

A successful response to the thematic-analysis question begins with a careful reading of the question and an answer that fully treats the theme—in this instance, the concept of social criticism and a comparison of how it is presented in two works. Taking the time to think through the topic, to jot down relevant notes concerning the character(s) and situations through which this theme is evidenced, and to outline the essay briefly is a vital initial step that helps students write a response that shows a cohesive treatment of the theme. It is very helpful to teach students to set aside a few minutes at the end of the time allotted in order to proofread, correct, and edit their work.

Better essays begin with an introduction or thesis statement, followed by good supporting paragraphs and a strong conclusion. The best essays contain specific examples to illustrate the student's ideas, and they are presented in a logical, systematic, and explicit manner. Focus is paramount in a thematic essay. Additionally, when answering this type of question, it is essential that students clearly state which works they are treating and limit their responses to and/or include the two works as stipulated by the question's instructions. Teachers should stress to their students the need to read all of the works on the required reading list so that they will have a more fully developed perspective and a better choice when faced with this thematic question on the exam.

See also the suggestions for additional strategies for improving student performance in the poetry-analysis section above.

Question 3: Text Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

The text-analysis question has two possible variations: one involves an analysis of a critical commentary about one work from the required reading list; the other is the analysis of an excerpt from a work on the reading list with two separate questions to answer. This year's question was of the latter type. It was based on Rubén Darío's poem "A Roosevelt." In part (a) students were asked to analyze the effect of the use of mythological and historical references in the fragment of the poem printed in the exam booklet. Part (b) asked students to discuss the meaning of the work's title in relation to verses 13–22, a part of the textual fragment in question.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean content score for the Standard Group—4.91 out of a possible 10 points (5 points for each of the question's two parts)—was slightly lower than the 5.08 mean score the group received on the 2005 exam. For the Total Group, the mean content score was 4.35, which represents a slight decrease from the group's mean content score of 4.71 in 2005. On the 2005 exam, the breakdown of mean content scores for the Total Group was 2.43 for part (a) and 2.28 for part (b). The mean content scores on this year's exam were 2.25 for part (a) and 2.10 for part (b).

For the Standard Group, the mean language score was 2.89 out of a possible 5 points, a decrease from that group's mean language score of 3.17 in 2005. The Total Group's mean language score of 3.02 was also noticeably lower than the group's 2005 mean language score of 3.47.

Question 3 generated the lowest mean scores for both language and content for the Standard and Total Groups on the 2005 exam. On the 2006 exam, it was the question for which the Total Group again received the lowest mean content and language scores and for which the Standard Group received the lowest mean language score. This year the Standard Group seemed better prepared for the content of this type of question: its mean content score was close to the highest mean content score for this group in 2006, which was 4.98 out of 9 points received on the thematic-analysis question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although the instructions stated that students were expected to write two separate short responses, some still wrote one response combining parts (a) and (b). Readers considered the single response and assigned a score to each of the two parts of the question, as the two topics could be plainly distinguished within the given response. Had these students written two clearly separate responses, it would have helped them to answer each part of the question fully, and the scores for some likely would have been higher.

The poem this year was perhaps less accessible—although likely equally as familiar—to students than the selection that appeared in the text-analysis question on last year’s exam (Juan Rulfo’s “*No oyes ladrar los perros*”). A number of students were more prone to paraphrase and/or summarize the content of the poetic excerpt than to provide an analysis of the effect of the mythological and historical references, or else to write repetitious responses. Many had difficulty addressing the meaning of the poem’s title as related specifically to verses 13–22. Although they should have been accustomed to dealing with the analysis of literary texts, a close reading of the passage was still problematic for many students. In particular, because they are taught to write a poetry analysis in question 1, some attempted to answer question 3 using the same approach—that is, offering a poetic rather than a textual analysis.

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 text-analysis question can be of two different types, so teachers should ensure that their students have practice in answering both, preferably under circumstances that are similar to those of the AP Exam. The type of question on this year’s exam required two separate answers, responses that are normally shorter than the fully developed essays required for the poetry-analysis and thematic-analysis questions.

Again, given the fact that this type of question can come from any work on the required reading list, students need to read all of the works in Spanish, in an unabbreviated form. Regardless of the genre, teachers can help their students through a close reading of all the works, including consideration of vocabulary and linguistic or stylistic features. Such preparation will aid students in answering all three free-response questions on the AP Spanish Literature Exam.