



Student Performance Q&A:

2006 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2006 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Raymond (Skip) Hyser of James Madison University in Harrisonburg, 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

What was the intent of this question?

The question required students to examine the changing ideals of American womanhood from the Revolution to the Civil War. Students had to analyze the ideals of “republican motherhood” and the “cult of domesticity,” discuss the ways in which these changing ideals affected the lives of women, and situate the changes in the context of race and class.

How well did students perform on this question?

Most provided answers that addressed all parts of the question. Students were particularly strong on document usage. They tended to use all of the documents and interpreted them correctly. Strong essays used the documents effectively to address gender and race issues. The mean score was 3.16 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A large number of students misunderstood the concepts of republican motherhood and the cult of domesticity and often conflated the two. Students had difficulty explaining the ideals and addressing the issue of class. Stronger essays included rich outside information that situated those ideals in the context of the Revolutionary Era and the Antebellum Period. However, many students provided limited outside information. Students sometimes went outside of the time period, especially into the Civil War and the Gilded Age.

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 strong foundation in women’s history and understand the role of ideals in society and their impact on people’s lives. They must be able to discuss change over time and be familiar with social history themes of race and class. Students should refrain from extensively quoting from the documents or discussing them in great detail—they should answer the question by integrating outside information with document analysis.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to examine how the Spanish settlements in the Southwest and English colonies in New England developed politically, religiously, and/or economically in the 1600s.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students generally performed well on this question. The mean score was 3.23 out of a possible 9 points. Students tried, not always successfully, to discuss both British New England and Spanish Southwest settlements in regard to two of the prompts. The prompts were extremely helpful in focusing the answers, and students discussing politics seemed to have stronger essays overall. Many students discussed how geography in the Southwest and New England shaped the European settlements in both regions.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors were in geographical and chronological knowledge. Students frequently expanded the boundaries of the Spanish Southwest to include the Caribbean, Central and South America, and even the Philippines, while New England often contained the Middle, Chesapeake, and Carolina colonies. Such errors led to discussions about tobacco, gold, the House of Burgesses, Quakers, and religious toleration in Maryland and Pennsylvania. There were many answers discussing the Spanish explorers and *conquistadores* (Cortés, Pizarro, De Soto, Magellan) as they conquered the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans, all of which occurred in the 1500s. Student references to *conquistadores* were acceptable if students meant Spanish leaders (almost always unnamed) in the 1600s who were developing the Southwest. Other incorrect references included “good land” in New England and staple crops exported from the Spanish Southwest.

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 broad understanding of the colonial period and a sense of the global framework that encompassed English, Spanish, and French colonization of North America. Teachers may emphasize certain themes such as religion, political and governmental development, economic institutions, relations with American Indians, or warfare.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The question required students to address changes in the federal government that came about as a result of the Civil War in two of three areas: race relations, economic development, and westward expansion.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students tended to have a better understanding of race relations and effectively related this to the changing role of the federal government. They had a harder time discussing the role of the government in relationship to economic development. The mean score was 2.75 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students demonstrated a lack of chronological understanding. They included too much material from both before and after the time period (1861–1877). The question asked students to address “why and how,” and many responses clearly emphasized the latter. Many essays treated this prompt as a Civil War and Reconstruction question—a “Southern” question—and downplayed any wider national implications. There was also a general misunderstanding of the government’s role during the 1860s and 1870s, especially in the realm of activism and aid for various segments of the American population. There was very little information cited in the 1861–1863 time period, and knowledge of economic development tended to be general.

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 strong grasp of chronology. In addition, they should cite concrete, specific information and recognize the importance of insightful analysis over description in essay writing. A good response to this question should display a sense of the difference between the rhetoric and the reality of laissez-faire capitalism and how it led, in many instances, to corruption and monopolization. Good students should recognize the issues of credit, tariffs, and finance, and how they affected the systems of sharecropping and tenancy after the Civil War.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to demonstrate knowledge of Progressive reform and of the 1920s with respect to two of three different topics (regulation of business, labor, or immigration) and to evaluate the argument of whether or not Progressive reform lost momentum in the 1920s. The question permitted broad latitude in discussing Progressive reform related to each of the topics.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.62 out of a possible 9 points. Most students wrote about two topics, but they did not always explicitly address the argument of whether or not Progressive reform lost

momentum in the 1920s. In those essays that did address the question, some were more specific on Progressive reform, while others were more specific on the issue of loss of momentum. Better essays used specific, relevant information rather than generic statements (e.g., “Americans liked business,” “Workers joined unions,” “Business expanded”) that could apply to any historical period.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Several essays discussed only the 1920s or the Progressive Era without any reference to the question of loss of momentum. Students did not link Progressive reform to the relevant, corresponding history of the 1920s. Some simply argued that because Progressive reforms were so successful, there was nothing left to do in the 1920s. Yet, these essays offered no evidence from the 1920s to develop that argument.

Students had a confused sense of chronology—for example, the Gilded Age was mistaken for the Progressive Era, and the Progressive Era for the 1920s.

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 should emphasize change and continuity in United States history over time and encourage students to link events and historical trends of one period to other periods. This will help students to think about history conceptually and recognize patterns and common themes.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The question required students to analyze underlying tensions in American society in the 1950s. The status quo was rendered here as consensus and conformity, two useful prompts that provided a baseline for the essay. Students were asked to demonstrate understanding of the 1950s and awareness that events of the period had consequences beyond that decade.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.05 out of a possible 9 points. Students tended to know in a general way what is meant by the status quo; they seemed especially able to write about conformity. Handling the matter of consensus eluded all but the better students. These three terms often were an indicator of the level of sophistication in a student’s response.

An overwhelming majority of students wrote about civil rights activists, and many wrote about the Civil Rights Movement in general. Better essays made the connection between events of the 1950s and subsequent developments in the Civil Rights Movement.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students wrote with less certainty about youth and intellectuals. They tended to discuss the influence of music and movies upon youth, although this discussion was not always clearly connected to a critique of the status quo. Students who wrote about intellectuals had a good understanding of the latter’s dissent, often noting the Beat poets.

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 better understanding of chronology. For example, in this essay many students wrote about the 1960s instead of the 1950s, often confining their answers to the Civil Rights Movement and student activism. While the decade of the 1950s is often taught as a period of consensus and conformity, students should be aware that there was also dissent during that period.