



Student Performance Q&A: 2007 AP[®] English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 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 the examination's three Question Leaders: Mary Rigsby of the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia; Mary Trachsel of the University of Iowa in Iowa City; 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 year's first question represented the debut of a new type of question for AP English Language and Composition, the synthesis essay. Students were given six brief sources, one of which was an advertisement that combined graphic and textual information, and directed to write a coherent, argumentative essay that synthesized at least three of the sources in support of their position on the effects of advertising in contemporary society. The students received this explicit instruction: "*Your argument should be central; the sources should support this argument. Avoid merely summarizing sources.*"

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.85 out of a possible 9 points. It is noteworthy that this number is nearly equivalent to the mean score on the traditional argument question, even though this was the first year that students were required to write in response to the synthesis question. The most successful student writers were able to develop their own positions on the effects of advertising, relative to the world of discourse created by the sources. The most effective essays evinced writers who were not subsumed by the discourse of the sources, who saw themselves as agents of their own mind and world views, and who were able to present their own opinions in

conversation with and in response to the sources. The most successful writers could present their own texts with a voice that illustrated a mind at work. These students were able to draw on and reflect what they already knew about advertising and its effects, to engage the source texts without oversimplifying them, to represent uncertainty and multiple points of view, and to understand the reader's need for explanation, examples, details, and context. In short, the successful writers controlled the sources, rather than being controlled by them.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students who scored in the lower half of the range on this question followed one of three paths. First, they generally failed to take and develop a strong position on the effects of advertising. Often, these writers simply reported what they saw in the source material. Their writing was dominated by the sources. The sources directed their attention, not the other way around. Students sorted the sources into pro and con sides; they classified the sources; or they simply moved from one source to the next, paraphrasing, summarizing, or commenting on them. These lower-half essays were likely to assert what their authors perceived to be true, expecting the truth of the statements to be self-evident. Second, lower-half responses tended simply to drop quotations or summarized material into the text, without introducing it or putting it in the context of the students' arguments. Third, these weaker essays either synthesized fewer than three sources in their own argument, or they used material from the source texts without acknowledging it by citing it properly.

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 suggests two avenues for preparing them for future synthesis questions. First, teachers should help their students understand research-based argumentative writing as writing that stakes out and develops a position in conversation with, and in response to, the issues raised in the sources. In preparing for the synthesis question, as with the traditional argument question, students need to be given opportunities to develop their own voices, to understand themselves as agents of their own learning, and to be self-reflective thinkers and writers. Second, teachers should teach students about the principles and practices of citing sources. The synthesis question on the AP English Language and Composition Exam allows students to cite sources informally, acknowledging a source by mentioning the author's last name or the source letter, in either an introductory phrase or parentheses. Teachers may want to inform students that more formal research-based papers should incorporate a citation system developed by a professional organization, such as the Modern Language Association, the American Psychological Association, or the Council of Scientific Editors. Whatever citation system teachers choose, they should emphasize to students the principles of fair use and ethical attribution of source material.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question called for students to analyze the strategies used by essayist Scott Russell Sanders in a passage that encourages readers to consider the personal, social, and environmental advantages of "staying put." Writing in response to Salman Rushdie's essay celebrating migrants who root themselves in ideas, not places, Sanders argues in favor of habitation, not migration.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.09 out of a possible 9 points. Even though all three free-response questions call for critical reading, the analysis question is first and foremost a reading question, and to succeed, students had to understand that Sanders and Rushdie take different positions on moving and that Sanders builds his argument on a refutation of Rushdie's. The most successful responses to this question noted how craftily Sanders establishes the American ethos of always being on the move and then associates that ethos with Rushdie's view, only to offer his own subtle counterargument. Many of the successful essays offered full accounts of how Sanders's historical examples work to cast doubt on Rushdie's claims about the cultural, moral, or environmental benefits of migration, and many of the responses scoring in the upper half of the range offered solid discussions of how Sanders's diction slants his presentation of the American ideal of constant movement. Some very good essays noted how Sanders's passage appeals to the readers' sense of reason and emotion and how it establishes his own credibility, showing all along how these appeals are substantiated by the organization, structure, style, and tone of the passage.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors resulted from students' misreading of the passage. Some asserted that Sanders and Rushdie were in agreement or that Sanders used Rushdie as an authority to support his own views. Other misinterpretations revealed that some students were attempting to understand Sanders's position in light of current news coverage of immigration issues. Still other lower-half writers seemed unable to comprehend the level of abstraction in the passage, resulting in a confused understanding of Sanders's central concepts, such as his comparison of being rooted in ideas rather than being rooted in places. Students scoring in the lower half who were able to understand Sanders's position often encountered two other problems. First, they seemed relatively unable to describe how the structure, style, and tone of the passage supported his developing position. Second, they often misunderstood and overstated Sanders's tone, seeing his text as a brutal attack on Rushdie.

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, they must ensure that students can comprehend complicated nonfiction prose in which the argument is sophisticated and nuanced, rather than baldly stated and developed. Second, they need to teach students about rhetorical theory and rhetorical analysis. Students must be able to understand and write about concepts such 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, they must teach students to analyze the unity of argumentative texts: the way that their form follows their function, and the ways that 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. The question presented them with a prompt based on Randy Cohen’s column, “The Ethicist,” from the *New York Times Magazine* of April 4, 2003, and directed them to write an essay in which they “develop a position on the ethics of offering incentives for charitable acts.”

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.94 out of a possible 9 points. Students who succeeded with this question considered audience, purpose, and effect. First and foremost, they developed a thoughtful, sophisticated, evidence-rich argument. The strongest writers often drew on—and specifically rendered—their own experience with school-based charity events. Many referred to figures in the public eye—for example, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Mother Theresa, and Martin Luther King Jr.—who illuminate the incentives-for-charity issue. Many addressed a broader picture, looking at the nature of what some characterized as our cutthroat society. Some strong writers were able to tap into their reading or viewing to support their claims, referring to Thoreau, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and even *The Simpsons*. High-scoring essays frequently employed effective rhetorical strategies themselves, with their authors using parallel structure, antithesis, and a range of other schemes and tropes to good effect.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There were three prevalent problems in essays that scored in the lower half of the range. The most common problem was unsupported opinion. The writers offered assertions, leaving their opinions unsupported and undeveloped. Second, some writers in the lower half seemed unsure of their own position and, while attempting to do justice to the many complicated facets of this issue, never fully established their own stance. Third, the lower-half papers that did attempt to argue a position frequently offered evidence that was sketchy or imprecise, often seeming unconnected to the claim.

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 advice for this question mirrors almost exactly the views about the argument question last year. Students’ performance on question 3 suggests three pedagogical directions for teachers. First, they need to teach 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, they should teach students to write essays that thoughtfully interact with their audience, that acknowledge readers’ possible counterarguments, that offer appropriate explanation and evidence, and that make the logic of their argument transparent and clear. Third, teachers must help students learn 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.