



Student Performance Q&A: 2007 AP[®] European History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 free-response questions for AP[®] European History were written by the Chief Reader, George Munro of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. 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?

This document-based question (DBQ) asked students to construct a response to a two-part prompt: to identify assumptions about children and to analyze how these assumptions affected child-rearing practices. Students were provided with 12 documents (11 prose texts and one visual image) on which to base an essay response. They needed to analyze these documents in order to group them and to determine the point of view of the documents.

The purpose of the DBQ is to judge the degree to which students can write an analytical essay based on the documents provided. Students' essays were evaluated on the extent to which they met the requirements specified in the core scoring guidelines. Students who exceeded these requirements could then earn additional points in the expanded core, which is based on holistic assessment.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 3.84 on the 9-point scale. Overall, this was a manageable task for many students, and some wrote thorough and well-developed essays. They understood most of the documents, and they were able to demonstrate sufficient analysis of them.

However, many students failed to recognize that there were two distinct tasks specified in the prompt, and therefore they struggled to construct an adequate thesis, which meant that they lost credit in the core scoring guidelines for points 1 and 4 (constructing a thesis and supporting a

thesis). Some students also continued to flounder with demonstrating acceptable analysis in terms of both grouping and point of view.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students commonly conflated the two tasks specified in the prompt. Hence, they were unable to construct an appropriate thesis, because the generic core scoring guidelines (and the directions given to students) require a thesis that is explicitly stated and addresses all parts of the question. Students were not required to write a comprehensive argument, but they were expected to acknowledge both parts of the question (assumptions and practices).

Point-of-view analysis continued to be a challenging task on this DBQ for many students. More attempted to demonstrate point of view than in years past; however, a lot of them relied on a formulaic approach that failed to demonstrate sufficient analysis. Simply using the terms “bias” or “credible” in their description of the documents, for example, without explaining *why* a source was biased or credible was insufficient.

This essay also presented some challenges for students in terms of grouping. Again, they often tried to plug the documents into a formula of sorts that simply did not work in terms of demonstrating analysis. For example, grouping by nationality was deemed unacceptable for this DBQ, as it led students to draw erroneous conclusions that could not be sustained by the documents.

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 critical that students recognize that the prompt may have multiple parts, so they must construct a thesis that explicitly addresses all components of the question. Some students also continue merely to restate the prompt without either providing any degree of specificity and/or acknowledging the full extent of the task(s) specified in the prompt.

Students need continued practice with point-of-view analysis, as well. It is important that they demonstrate appropriate analysis, making a reasonable attempt to explain *why* a source expresses a particular view, instead of simply making unsubstantiated claims about bias or credibility.

Similarly, other students strain to organize suitable groups. Although looking for commonalities based on nationality, social position, or types of documents may be appropriate for some DBQs, it is not relevant in every case, and it was generally unworkable for the 2007 DBQ. Thus, students need additional practice with higher-level analysis; simply recognizing commonalities is not necessarily indicative of apt categorization.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent was to have students analyze how the lives of European women were affected over the two-decade period from 1930 to 1950. Explicitly noted were the two periods involving the rise of militarism and the actual years of the Second World War. Implicitly noted (only by the dates indicated in the time frame) was the postwar period.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.44 on the 9-point scale. Overall, students had trouble with this question. Because the topic was embedded in most of the popular textbooks, students were forced to “hunt” for data to incorporate into their answers. Their responses therefore turned into a discussion of U.S. history and general commentaries on the lives of women. Students did not read to the end of the prompt and recognize the demands made by the dates 1930–1950.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The greatest omission was the period of the 1930s. Students saw this as the “war” question and immediately launched into an explanation of the 1940s, thereby ignoring half of the required time period. The most common error was the failure to understand the term “militarism,” as students assumed it referred to the outbreak of the war in 1939. Finally, they interpreted the term “impact” to mean roles and thus discussed what women actually “did” during the war rather than how militarism and the war affected them.

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?

Two major deficiencies appeared throughout students’ essays. The first was a failure to fully address the entire question. The overwhelming trend was to conflate militarism with the outbreak of the war and thus ignore the period of the 1930s. Therefore students failed to address half of the prescribed time period. Second, they did not seem to understand the true meaning of the word “militarism,” so this topic was frequently omitted or tied solely to the outbreak of the war. If students were directed, when reading the question, to underline or circle all of the tasks enumerated by the prompt, this might increase their awareness of the elements required in their responses and thus eliminate omissions. However, given that many students also misused the term, teachers may wish to place a greater stress on learning key historical vocabulary.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

In this question, students were expected to examine the problems within the Soviet Union from the death of Stalin in 1953 to the demise of the Soviet state and the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev at the end of 1991. The direction to “analyze” is a traditional mandate in AP European History and

one that experienced AP teachers presumably taught their students. Unlike previous free-response questions on Eastern Europe that asked students to discuss some aspect of the Cold War or the relationship between the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, this question expected them to focus their attention on problems *within* the Soviet Union and *link* those problems to the collapse of the Soviet system. Students could incorporate material about the Cold War and/or Eastern Europe, provided that linkage to the problems within the Soviet Union was part of the analysis. The question did not specify the types of problems to be analyzed (political, social, economic, or cultural), offering students a wide range of valid approaches. The prompt's reference to the "collapse of the Soviet system" provided students with an opportunity to reflect on the concepts of "collapse" and "the Soviet system" individually; given the material in the textbooks, it is likely that most students interpreted the term "Soviet system" as standing for the Soviet state and/or empire, the Communist party, or the ideology of Communism. (The time frame of this question should also remind AP teachers that they have an obligation to cover the entire chronology as outlined in the Course Description.)

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.01 on the 9-point scale. The question appeared to differentiate students reasonably well both in terms of their understanding of the subject matter, as well as the caliber of training they are receiving from their AP teachers in the writing of analytical essays. The strongest responses displayed an impressive degree of substantive knowledge and factual mastery of the topic; many students recognized the importance of context and often began their essays by laying out the historical context of the policies and legacy of the Stalin era. Organization of the answer in either a chronological or thematic manner proved equally successful, although the thematic approach, which created categories of problems to be analyzed, generally proved easier to score. Less successful efforts provided little if any analysis but nevertheless accurately described the problems within the Soviet Union. The least able responses produced canned or generic accounts of the Cold War and/or Soviet relations with the Eastern European satellites. Even the least effective responses, however, often included considerable amounts of specific information that simply failed to answer the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students failed to pay sufficient attention to the prompt's focus on "problems within the Soviet Union." The least successful essays offered accounts, often detailed and factually accurate, of the Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, or of relations between the Soviet Union and the Eastern European satellites, without linking such information to the problems within the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Soviet system. Given the clarity of the prompts within the question, one can only assume that many students received limited and inadequate training in analytical essay writing.

The failure to provide a valid and developed thesis statement in the opening paragraph (or even the closing paragraph) represents a continuing problem for many students. Furthermore, too many apparently fail to grasp the importance of the thesis paragraph in shaping the structure of the body of the essay. As a result, a good number of essays created the impression that students had not followed the recommendation of spending a few minutes organizing their response before actually beginning to write. Many, apparently, have been taught to equate quantity with quality.

Quite a few of the less successful essays demonstrated a superficial or erroneous understanding of Communism, in both theory and practice. Some of these misconceptions may be cultural in nature (e.g., that Communism transforms workers into lazy human beings, or that Stalin’s USSR paid everyone the same salary, because equality is a central tenet of Marxist ideology), but one of the jobs of teachers is the destruction of such stereotypes; teachers and students must remember that understanding does not mean approval.

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 must ensure that they cover the entire syllabus during the academic year. Those who end the course at 1945 and tell students to then master the last few chapters on their own are penalizing their students. If the price for reaching the post-1945 era entails cutting back on a favorite topic, then such instructors need to plan the academic year with greater care before the resumption of school. Some AP teachers begin the academic year with the post-1945 chapters and only then proceed to the early modern period (Renaissance/Reformation).

Students also must be granted the opportunity to engage in analytical writing in their AP history classes—every week, if possible. For public school teachers carrying five sections of 30 students each, 150 weekly essays would soon prove overwhelming; therefore, those working under such conditions should adopt strategies that will allow them to survive without feeling they are failing to prepare their students for the AP Exam. Grading only the thesis paragraph in a 35-minute essay or simply requiring students to submit a thesis paragraph with the main points presented in outline form may prove helpful. Peer reviewing may also ease the burden on individual teachers, although they will need to spend some time training their students in the process of scoring analytical essays. Such steps may allow teachers to instruct students in the mechanics of analytical writing without being overwhelmed by the demands of the course.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question was designed to elicit analysis of the urban experience that transformed Western Europe in the nineteenth century. Its use of the terms “problems and opportunities” gave students an organizing structure to help them sort through a vast number of pertinent elements and led most to respond in terms of both the process and the experience of urbanization. The prompt was broadly written, which allowed students to use as much of the century span as they chose and also accommodated a variety of approaches. Most frequently students used economic and social themes and evidence, but political, intellectual, and cultural frameworks were also very successfully employed. The primary task—analysis—asked students to develop links between their often substantial factual knowledge with consequences, and many of them did it well.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 4.16 on the 9-point scale. Most students were familiar with the various aspects of urbanization, usually having more to say about problems than opportunities. Effective answers often showed sophisticated analysis of the links between events, such as rapid

inward migration leading to overcrowding and squalid conditions, which in turn led to greater government involvement in creating sanitation systems, building regulations, redesign of cities, and so forth. Many students were able to establish analytical links between the urban experience and the emergence of political ideologies, class systems, developments in the arts, and other concepts that demonstrated a grasp of the question's complexity.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was an off-task response. Many essays used industrialization as the starting point for their discussions, which was often an effective means of establishing context. However, these responses sometimes substituted industrialization for urbanization or did not distinguish between the two phenomena, resulting in essays that did not sufficiently deal with the question's tasks. Assertions that were unsupported by evidence and/or evidence that was accurately provided but left unexamined also resulted in much lower scores than might otherwise have been merited.

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 will benefit from frequent opportunities to develop essay-writing skills. It is critical that their essays engage from the outset with the terms and tasks in the prompt (answer the question asked) and that assertions are supported by relevant and specific factual evidence. Regular training in essay writing is critical to enhancing student success. Along with frequent practice at putting their understanding of history into words, students would also benefit from incorporating the rigor of specificity, especially of time and place.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to choose and analyze at least two factors of any type that prevented the development of a unified German state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It allowed them to discuss a wide range of influences—political, economic, social, military, religious, and geopolitical. They needed to select broad issues, evaluate them, and support them with specific historical events.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 3.1 on the 9-point scale. Students performed adequately overall, though not exceptionally well. Almost every essay had an acceptable thesis statement. The stronger responses discussed several factors from both centuries. Even weaker essays had a thesis statement, and most had some knowledge of at least one or two relevant events from the period.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors were a lack of discussion of events from one century or the other, a dearth of analysis, a discussion of only one factor, or an attempt to discuss German unification in the nineteenth century.

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 should learn general test-taking skills, including reading the question carefully and pacing themselves so they can write the entire exam.

Students should be taught to think historically: to analyze facts as well as to repeat them and to support broad generalizations with specific evidence. As part of this process, they will learn how to write a thesis statement and support it with facts. Teachers need to encourage students to think about *why* things did or did not happen and how one event or person influenced another.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to construct an essay composed of two parts. The first part of the question asked them to identify the geopolitical and economic factors that contributed to the rivalry between Britain and France during the years between 1689 and 1789; the second part directed them to assess the results of this rivalry for both countries during that time period.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 2.26 on the 9-point scale. Many students had difficulty creating an explicit thesis. Most were able to identify a few factors that contributed to the rivalry but often did so with minimal supporting relevant evidence. Students evinced additional problems in assessing the results for both countries and often resorted to general assertions. The stronger essays addressed all the prompts given in the question at some length with multiple pieces of supporting relevant evidence.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students did not correctly understand the term “geopolitical” and therefore often referred to political factors. Along with this error, they did not look at the question with a global focus. Many identified only the colonial rivalry in North America as a factor. Others chose to compare/contrast the two countries, especially in regard to religion and system/structure of governments, whereas the question prompt asked for identification of factors and assessment of results. Some students without a sense of chronology answered the essay prompts with information completely outside the time frame.

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?

AP teachers should review the definition of the prompts featured in the Course Description and scoring guidelines. They need to emphasize reading and responding to the whole question and should instruct their students in how to write an explicit thesis that addresses all parts of the question and that is then supported throughout the essay. Students should be trained in how to analyze the tasks of the question. When the question prompt identifies a time period, students

must remain within the time frame and only add information outside the time period that strengthens the argument presented in the essay.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The parameters of this question were well within the principles of the Course Description. It was a social history question involving a mainstream subject with which students should be quite familiar: the grievances of the Third Estate in France on the eve of the revolution. And although it was, in general, a social history question, students could respond from a variety of perspectives: social, political, economic, and/or intellectual.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.55 on the 9-point scale. Student performance on this question was mixed. It is a mainstream topic, and the question had two tasks: identify and analyze. Virtually all students could identify something, and the prompt to “analyze” allowed the stronger ones to distinguish themselves.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker students often referred only to the “Third Estate”; they did not identify specific groups, although they were likely to identify specific grievances. The most difficult task was to analyze the extent to which the group addressed the grievances. Some students referred to political parties, such as the Jacobins or Girondins, as a group, and others analyzed the ability of more than one group to address its grievances, which was not the precise prompt of the question. Many students did not respond to the terms of the question. This failure usually took the form of either a narrative of the French Revolution or an attempt to force the response into a preexisting construct, such as the political, economic, and social causes of the French Revolution. Quite a few students discussed only events of 1789, ignoring the charge of the prompt to carry the analysis up to 1799.

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 *extremely* important that students learn to respond precisely to the terms of the question. Teachers must instruct their students in that skill. The use of previous free-response and document-based questions in the classroom, along with their attendant scoring guidelines and rationales—all available on AP Central®—is essential.