



Student Performance Q&A:

2007 AP[®] Spanish Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 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 "Puentes," a three-stanza poem by Pablo Neruda. Students were asked to analyze the pessimistic vision of existence 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 entire exam and receives two separate scores. The first, for the content of the analysis, accounts for 70 percent of the essay's score; the second, for language, is worth 30 percent.

This year for question 1, the mean score for content for the Standard Group^{*} was 4.79 out of a possible 9 points. For the Total Group, the mean score for content was 4.53 out of 9. Compared with the 2006 exam, the scores of both groups were slightly higher by the same approximate amount: the Standard Group received a mean content score of 4.52 in 2006, whereas the Total Group's mean content score in 2006 was 4.37.

^{*}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.

This year’s mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.38 out of a possible 5 points, slightly higher than the mean language score of 3.24 out of 5 for this same group on the 2006 exam. The mean language score for the Total Group in 2007 was 3.61, again slightly higher than the mean score for language of 3.48 on the 2006 exam. For both groups, question 1 earned the highest mean content score this year, and on this question the Standard Group also earned the highest mean language score.

The poem selected was of medium length. Its form and content—including vocabulary, poetic syntax, and imagery—were for the most part accessible to students. The poem was notable for its complex structure, for the richness and abundance of poetic language, and for the devices that characterized it. These aspects presented a challenge to students attempting to discuss a great variety of rhetorical figures in a well-organized essay. The abstract theme of the pessimistic view of existence was symbolized in a similarly abstract way by the “bridges” referred to in the poem’s title; other images in the poem made this theme more concrete.

What were common student errors or omissions?

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

- Discussing the pessimistic vision of existence without focusing on the question and/or the poem itself
- Paraphrasing the poem in a descriptive way
- 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
- Relying on a prepared overview of Neruda (some of his other texts are included on the required reading list) rather than focusing on the poem itself

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, and it features a poem that does not come from the required reading list. The advantage for students is having the text before them while they consider, plan, and write their response. Reading new poems and practicing ways to respond to the same type of prompt under the same conditions and constraints of the exam will help students to refine their skills. In addition, students will be better equipped to write a well-developed and organized treatment of the question.

Teachers can help by encouraging students to set aside time to read the question carefully and to then read the poem thoroughly with the question in mind. Teachers might want to suggest that they underline or circle the important parts of the question—in this case, the pessimistic vision of existence, how the poetic devices and language communicate this theme, and the need for specific supporting examples from the poem itself. Through this type of exercise, students will remember to fully address the question. Teaching students to take a few minutes to outline their responses and to reserve some time for proofreading, editing, and/or correcting elements of their work is a valuable practice.

Throughout the AP Spanish Literature course, teachers can assist their students by doing the following things:

- Involving the class in small-group work or, in a prewriting phase, having the class collectively share their thoughts concerning a poem's theme, form, and the poetic language and devices employed
- Routinely working with and helping students to better understand the literary vocabulary, such as the various rhetorical devices or figures of speech and rhyme and/or meter
- Teaching students how to better identify poetic devices and their effects
- Encouraging students to write more than one draft of an essay on any given poem
- Using peer review among the students in the class as part of the editing process

Question 2: Thematic Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

In the thematic analysis, two kinds of questions are possible: a comparison of a given theme or topic in two works from the required reading list or 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 the theme of *el destino* in two works chosen from a list of four titles: "Dos palabras," by Isabel Allende; Jorge Luis Borges's "La muerte y la brújula"; "Las medias rojas," by Emilia Pardo Bazán; and Rima LIII ("Volverán las oscuras golondrinas"), by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. The theme of *el destino* has many possible interpretations, including destiny, fate, destination, fortune, future, and one's lot in life. All these were considered acceptable approaches, provided that the responses incorporated the analysis required by the question.

How well did students perform on this question?

For the Standard Group, the mean score for the content of this question was 4.07 out of a possible 9 points, compared with a mean content score of 4.98 on the 2006 exam. The mean content score for the Total Group was 3.89 out of 9 points, compared with 4.75 in 2006. For both groups, this was a substantial decrease. Of the three questions, the mean content score for the thematic analysis was the lowest on this year's exam.

The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.04 on a 5-point scale, compared with 3.27 on the 2006 exam. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.3, compared with 3.48 the previous year. In both cases, this represents a slight decrease from the mean language scores received on the 2006 exam.

Clearly, the four works listed in the question were familiar to most students and offered a good selection from which to choose. Some students may have had difficulty relating Bécquer's Rima LIII to the theme because it required a strong recall of a lyric poem (rather than a narrative text with a plot); additionally, compared with the other choices, the theme of *el destino* was perhaps less explicit in this text.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors and omissions included the following:

- Inability to deal with the theme of *destino* 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?

As with all questions on the AP Spanish Literature Exam, a successful response to the thematic analysis question begins with a careful reading of the question itself and continues with an answer that fully treats the topic—here a comparison of the theme of *el destino* in the two works selected, with supporting examples from these texts. The best essays will contain specific examples to support the students' ideas, and they will be presented in a systematic, explicit, and logical manner. When answering this question, it is imperative that students clearly state which texts they are treating and that they limit their responses to those works, as stipulated in the instructions for the question.

Teachers need to remind students of the importance of reading all the works on the required list. In addition, they can help their students achieve good essay scores in a number of ways:

- Give students writing practice in class with all aspects of essay composition: prewriting, outlining, writing, proofreading, and editing.
- In addition to peer editing, teachers can ask students to act as editors of their *own* essays, an exercise that can help them recognize problems and refine their essay-writing skills.
- Help students learn to stay on the topic by routinely pointing out instances in which the content of their essays is superfluous or irrelevant to the subject.
- Teach students to distinguish analysis from mere paraphrasing or plot summary.
- Teach students how to develop and properly support their ideas in the analysis at hand.

Additional strategies include those mentioned for improving student performance on the poetry analysis question, 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 an analysis of an excerpt from a work on the reading list, with two separate questions to answer. This year's question was of the former type, and it was based on a passage taken from *Historia de la literatura española e*

hispanoamericana, by Emiliano Díez-Echarri and José María Roca Franquesa. Students were asked to analyze how the ideas about the literary character of Don Juan expressed in the critical commentary were reflected in *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*, by the dramatist Tirso de Molina.

How well did students perform on this question?

For the Standard Group, the mean content score was 4.08 out of 9 possible points, only marginally higher than the mean content score earned for question 2. For the Total Group, the mean content score was 3.93 out of 9. These numbers are not directly comparable with the 2006 content scores because last year's question was of the alternative type, with two subquestions worth 5 points each, yielding 10 possible points to be earned rather than 9.

For the Standard Group, the mean language score was 2.86 out of a possible 5 points, and for the Total Group it was 3.07. The 2006 exam used the same 5-point scale for scoring the language component. The 2007 mean language score for the Standard Group represents a slight decrease when compared with the mean language score of 2.89 on the 2006 exam. The 2007 mean language score for the Total Group reflects a slight increase when compared with the mean language score of 3.02 on the 2006 exam. Question 3 earned the lowest of the three mean language scores for both the Standard and Total Groups on this year's exam.

What were common student errors or omissions?

El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra, a three-act play, was the lengthiest work included in the questions on this year's exam. Students who, because of its length, had not read this work or had not read it in its entirety were unable to address the question competently and left blank responses. Because the cited critical passage listed a series of attributes describing the Don Juan character, some students in their responses simply enumerated (instead of analyzing) textual examples that illustrated the reflection in Tirso's play of the ideas expressed in the quotation. Others were prone to paraphrase and/or summarize the content of the quotation in lieu of textual analysis. A number of students did not understand the meaning of the word *incrédulo*, which figured prominently in the critical commentary, and thus had difficulty dealing with the question.

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?

In addition to the suggestions given above to help students better prepare for and perform on the poetry analysis and the thematic analysis questions, further recommendations are as follows:

- Find critical commentaries for a number of texts on the required reading list in order to practice this type of textual analysis question. At some point or points during the year have students answer this kind of question under conditions and constraints similar to those of the AP Spanish Literature Exam.
- Encourage students to highlight or circle important words or concepts in the critical commentary.
- Teach students how to write effective thesis statements and conclusions.
- 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 as opposed to, for example, anecdotal commentaries.

Again, because the text analysis question can be based on any work on the required reading list, it is important that students read each work completely. Teachers can further assist students through a close reading of all the works, including a consideration of vocabulary, linguistic, and stylistic features, regardless of the genre. Such preparation will aid students in answering all three free-response questions on the AP Spanish Literature Exam.