



## **Student Performance Q&A:**

### **2007 AP<sup>®</sup> United States History Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2007 free-response questions for AP<sup>®</sup> 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 document-based question required students to use the 10 documents provided to analyze changes in agriculture between 1865 and 1900 with regard to technology, government policy, and economic conditions. Additionally, they had to explain farmers’ responses to these changes. It was a straightforward and mainstream question that invited students to place the agrarian protest of the period in a broader context. It also evaluated their ability to analyze historical documents and draw historical inferences from them to support an analytical argument.

##### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score on this essay was 3.49 out of a possible 9 points. Overall, students performed well, analyzing changes in agriculture with respect to the three overlapping categories: technology, government policy, and economic conditions. Many, however, neglected to evaluate farmers’ responses to changes. The documents tended to be used competently, and most students used a majority of them. Documents that students employed with the most success were the table of agricultural prices between 1865 and 1900 and the map of railroads in 1870 and 1890. Documents that noticeable numbers of students misinterpreted included the 1882 sharecropping contract, the 1892 speech by Mary Elizabeth Lease, and the 1894 magazine article dealing with American Indian policy.

The question discriminated well, sorting students by their understanding of the issues relating to this time period, their ability to utilize sources, and their ability to construct an argument. The better essays demonstrated knowledge of the impact of technology, government policy, and economic conditions on agriculture. The majority of students addressed all three categories. Stronger essays did a better job of directly linking farmers' responses to these changes, either explicitly or implicitly.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Many students failed to directly address farmers' responses to the changes in technology, government policy, and economic conditions. They also tended to conflate government policy and economic conditions, as well as the roles of the federal and state governments. This led to some misunderstandings of documents, as some students thought the sharecropping contract was an agreement with the government, and others believed Mary Elizabeth Lease's critique of unnamed economic or financial interests meant a Big Brotherish federal government. A good number of students also misunderstood the document from *Oklahoma Magazine*, seeing it as evidencing a policy that reduced the land available for farming.

Although many essays lacked outside information or failed to tie it directly to the question, the superior responses provided an abundance of additional facts and applied them meaningfully to the issues under discussion. The extent of external information and the success in weaving it into an essay became one factor that discriminated between weaker and stronger essays.

***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 mastery of factual information and a sense of chronology. Teachers should emphasize change over time in U.S. history and the importance of chronology for understanding context. Students should also be taught to provide specific outside information that situates a document or issue in a historical context. Furthermore, they must be able to make inferences from documents; many read the documents too literally, without a sense of context. Teachers can encourage students to use documents as prompts to think about outside information. For example, more students could have used the speeches by Mary Elizabeth Lease and William Jennings Bryan as starting points to analyze the Populist movement.

Emphasis should be placed on a careful reading of the question to avoid the tendency to "miss" some of its critical parts (in this case, farmers' responses). Additionally, students need to extract the main idea of the document relative to the question instead of merely quoting or paraphrasing it. Finally, it is essential that students be able to provide synthesis and analysis; many struggled to create a structure for their responses. They should answer the question by integrating both outside information and document analysis, showing how and why the information supports their thesis.

## Question 2

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was to assess students' understanding of the causes and significance of backcountry violence in the eighteenth century and how such violence affected the social and political world of eighteenth-century American communities. Students also had to comprehend how the protests often reflected as well as created sectional, especially east/west, tensions. In addition, this question encouraged them to use a thematic approach in addressing and discussing historical events.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score on this essay was 2.53 out of a possible 9 points. Student performance was adequate and comparable to past performance on the exam, although it could have been stronger given the clarity of the question and the range of choices provided. The low scores, however, might be a reflection of how these revolts are taught in class. The best students added material in order to build the context further, introducing other issues related to early America but not directly pertinent to the question (for example, Shays, a veteran of the Revolution, who did not receive all of his Revolutionary War pay).

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

The biggest disappointment was the frequent confusion of these rebellions with other American revolts—Bacon's, slave, and Britain versus colonial America—the consequence of which was a low score. Although students were generally able to identify the Whiskey Rebellion, they also turned the backcountry tax revolt into resistance to temperance and prohibition, with references on occasion to the Eighteenth Amendment, or they believed the Whiskey Rebellion was a prelude to the American Revolution. Shays' Rebellion frequently was confounded with the seventeenth-century Bacon's Rebellion, or, like the Whiskey Rebellion, erroneously described as a precursor to the Revolution. The Paxton Boys and the Regulators were infrequently addressed, often incorrectly. American Indians were commonly cited as causes of rebellions, although they were significant only in the Paxton Boys fracas. A number of students placed the revolts in a variety of incorrect locations, and the evidence in support of the arguments was frequently superficial.

### ***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 emphasize analytical skills and exercises—compare/contrast, synthesis, evaluation, connection, why—in the full context of history. Narrative description alone is an insufficient response to AP free-response questions. Teachers, however, should consider integrating narrative details into some of the themes that can be found in the *AP United States History Course Description* and use this approach to develop and reinforce analytical skills in their chronological courses.

### Question 3

#### ***What was the intent of this question?***

The question was designed to measure students' knowledge of the way the Second Great Awakening influenced two of the four selected topics (abolitionism, temperance, the cult of domesticity, and utopian communities). The prompt permitted broad latitude in discussing the influences and central beliefs of the Second Great Awakening and connecting it to two of these subjects.

#### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score on this essay was 3.12 out of a possible 9 points. Most students wrote about two topics, but they simply provided a general description of them. Many tended to include too much information about the periods before and after the Second Great Awakening. The better essays used relevant information anchored in the time frame and then made a clear link between the Second Great Awakening and the two chosen topics.

#### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Many students paraphrased the question and gave no indication that they understood the Second Great Awakening was a religious movement. They also provided considerable information outside the time period of the question (Nineteenth Amendment and Betty Friedan; Puritans; Jonathan Edwards and the First Great Awakening; Emancipation Proclamation; Martin Luther King; and Eighteenth and Twenty-first Amendments and speakeasies). Students seemed to have a simplistic understanding of the cult of domesticity, utopian communities, and temperance ("alcohol was bad"). Most essays offered a mere description of the topics rather than 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?***

Teachers should integrate and review themes such as religion, reform movements, and women's rights. Utilizing and/or constructing time lines for social, political, and economic movements and trends can help students develop a broader historical perspective. Such an approach will encourage them to think about history conceptually. Students need instruction and writing practice that focuses on chronology, cause and effect, and change over time. When answering a free-response question, students must consider the intent of the question before writing and then write analytically. Description and knowledge of facts are important, but effective essays use linkage.

## Question 4

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

The question evaluated students' understanding of the shift in the role of the federal government in the economy, society, and international affairs from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, using the presidential administration of Theodore Roosevelt as a transitional period. It was a straightforward question that required students to analyze the changing role of the federal government in two out of four areas: labor, trusts, conservation, and world affairs.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score on this essay was 3.02 out of a possible 9 points. Better essays demonstrated knowledge of the federal government's position on these issues prior to Roosevelt, or when he took office in 1901, and then analyzed to what extent change occurred. Some essays indicated that certain actions taken during Roosevelt's administration would be addressed in later federal policies. Students sometimes interwove categories in their essays, for example, trusts and labor. Additionally, essays tended to include much more specific historical information about world affairs than about the other categories. The topic selected most often was world affairs, with trusts as the next most popular category. Labor was chosen third most often, and conservation was picked the least. Students often wrote about conservation with broad generalizations that lacked specific supporting detail.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Many essays confused Theodore Roosevelt with Franklin D. Roosevelt, sometimes weaving the policies of both presidents together. Some dealt solely with Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Although the question asked about the change in the role of the "federal government . . . under President Theodore Roosevelt," which might have included Congress and the Supreme Court in addition to the president, most students tended to equate the federal government with Roosevelt alone. Thus, important policies and actions of the Supreme Court and Congress were ignored. For example, very few students mentioned the cases of *Lochner v. New York* (1905) and *Muller v. Oregon* (1908), both of which related directly to the changing role of the federal government in the area of labor.

Essays that dealt with labor and conservation tended to be general and lacked specific historical information.

### ***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 understand change and continuity in United States history over time. Teachers must also stress the importance of writing a clear thesis that explicitly answers the question. It is essential for students to organize their essays around a logical presentation of accurate historical information to support the thesis. Teachers can reinforce writing skills through explicit instruction in writing essays that answer historical questions. AP history teachers should be encouraged to teach the process of historical writing as opposed to just narrative composition.

## Question 5

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This question required students to analyze the accomplishments of two different second-term administrations, using their “landslide” electoral victories as a basis of comparison. They were asked to draw conclusions about the relationship between these electoral victories and each president’s subsequent political effectiveness and legislative success. Further, the question invited students to demonstrate their ability to analyze the complexities of electoral politics as they intersected with external events. The stronger students were able to show that in most of these cases, the success of the administration was determined, at least in part, by the effectiveness of the president’s response to these challenges.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for this essay was 3.25 out of a possible 9 points. Most students rarely made any distinction between “legislative success” and “political effectiveness,” though this dual prompt probably encouraged them to offer a wider range of responses than they might have produced with a single one. Often, however, essays did not clearly or explicitly relate the landslide victories to the presidents’ previous accomplishments. Many students observed that electoral success does not necessarily lead to success on the job. The better students were able to demonstrate “historical consciousness” by placing these presidents into a longer-term historical context when evaluating their success or legacy.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Although the question asked for second-term accomplishments, a full answer actually required discussion of first terms as well, making this a challenging task. Because in the instances of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan, more happened in their first terms, this meant that students often knew and wrote more about these first terms. Only the stronger students were able to demonstrate a clear sense of chronology, distinguishing first and second terms. Most found FDR’s second term particularly difficult to explain. They often confused first- and second-term accomplishments and/or strayed ahead into discussions of his leadership in the Second World War.

Many students reduced the Johnson administration to Vietnam, and some claimed that he was not elected at all. In a similar way, discussion of the Nixon administration was reduced to an explanation of Watergate, and his first term was omitted, with many students claiming he was first elected in 1972. Many students did a surprisingly good job discussing Reagan’s fiscal policy; on the other hand, very few seemed able to describe his Central American policy, though they did often know about the Iran-Contra affair.

Other common errors included the following:

- Few essays made clear comparisons, and many simply described events or policies without analysis or explanation.
- Some students confused Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt, and Reagan and Nixon.

- Many students who discussed the Reagan or Nixon administrations did not effectively discuss their first-term accomplishments; this was less of a problem with Johnson.
- There was a noticeable tendency to “story-tell” rather than to analyze Watergate or Johnson’s Vietnam policy.
- Students appeared to know very little about events after 1968.
- Although some students provided effective discussion of Nixon’s foreign policy accomplishments, few said much about domestic issues, including environmental policy.

***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 make an effort to conclude their course at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This could be done by focusing on themes in the last third of the twentieth century rather than addressing one presidential administration after another. The Course Description offers suggested themes that could be examined. Teachers should also encourage students to think broadly and to be more sensitive to the way outside events impact politics, emphasizing *change over time*.

Additionally, teachers should help students to develop their ability to compare and contrast and offer a more thematic approach. They should show students how to break down questions into component parts and then teach students how to craft an essay that addresses all parts of the question. Such an approach to essay writing would require students to analyze events and policies rather than to simply describe them.