



Student Performance Q&A: 2007 AP® World History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 free-response questions for AP® World History were written by the Chief Reader, Merry Wiesner-Hanks of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and Question Leaders Sharon Cohen of Springbrook High School in Silver Spring, Maryland; Joseph (Jay) Harmon of Cypress Woods High School in Cypress, Texas; and William Zeigler of San Marcos High School in California. 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?

As with previous document-based questions, students were required to answer the prompt using their analyses of a preselected set of documents. The prompt was straightforward and asked students to write an essay regarding Han and Roman attitudes toward technology, based on their analyses of eight documents. The eight documents, four from Han China and four from Rome, were written by upper-class males and reflect little diversity in social opinion or class within their societies. In addition to showing the societies' attitudes toward technology, students were to demonstrate their understanding of the documents by grouping them and analyzing the authors' points of view. Finally, in order to provide evidence that they understood the broader context presented by the question, students were to identify an additional type of document and explain how it would help illustrate the attitudes of the Han and/or Romans toward technology.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of 2.84 out of a possible 9 points was significantly lower than in the two previous years (the mean was 3.27 in 2006 and 3.91 in 2005). The reason for the lower scores in 2007 had less to do with student performance than with changes in the generic scoring guidelines that were introduced in 2006, though there was a general feeling among Readers that more students than in the past were attempting to fulfill all of the requirements of the document-based question: writing a thesis in the introduction or conclusion, using all of the documents, analyzing multiple points of view, explaining the need for additional documents, and categorizing the documents into multiple

groups. Although the prompt did not require a comparison, many students effectively used a comparative structure in order to develop their arguments.

In addition, many students showed their understanding of the time period by providing a wealth of outside information regarding the Han dynasty and the Roman Empire. Essays included information about Confucianism, the Silk Routes, the connections between the two empires, Roman imperial expansion, and philosophical principles from both empires. Many students were also able to show that they understood how the documents illustrated Han Confucian relationships and a concern for the peasantry in contrast to the Roman hierarchical class structure with its lack of regard for the lower-class worker. These insights were most often expressed in the students' discussion of Han concern for all people as opposed to the Roman concern for glory.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although students did make a greater attempt than in the past to fulfill all of the requirements of the essay, many still fell short in these attempts, repeatedly failing to provide analysis. Furthermore, they often did not answer the prompt by showing Han or Roman attitudes toward technology but rather focused on issues regarding technology itself. The attitudes toward technology expressed in the Han documents were much clearer than those in the Roman ones and were usually better understood in student responses. However, students often misinterpreted the Han official, Huan Guan, stating that he did not like technology, whereas he viewed the government-sponsored technology as inferior. In addition, students frequently misread both the Seneca and Cicero documents as being negative toward technology, whereas they more accurately represent negative attitudes toward the working class who used the technology. Finally, the documents by Huan Tan (3), the Han government (4), and Plutarch (6) were often attributed to their respective subjects (mythical Emperor Fuxi, Governor Tu Shih, and Tribune Gaius Gracchus) instead of the actual authors.

Many students continued to provide limited theses in their introductions, often having clearer and more complete theses in the conclusions. Thesis statements also tended to be rambling proclamations rather than succinct statements of purpose. Students most often grouped the documents in terms of some type of Han or Roman characteristics, instead of looking at broader means of categorization. They received no credit for grouping the documents just as Han and Roman, because that information was already provided.

In a welcome development, students generally showed their understanding of the documents by paraphrasing rather than presenting long quotes, but as in past document-based questions, they often did not effectively use the sources as evidence of their theses and instead relied on the Reader to make the connections for them.

Although students certainly attempted to write about the authors' points of view and to request additional documents that could supplement their assessment of the sources provided, they did not follow through with the analysis required in both of these areas. Often they would note that a document was written by an upper-class person but would not explain why or how this might have informed the author's point of view. Documents by peasants were most often asked for, but students missed the point by not explaining why or how this would help broaden an understanding of Han or Roman attitudes toward technology. Again, they relied on the Reader to make the connections, not clarifying their own analysis of the point of view or the need for an additional document.

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 continue to lose credit by not effectively responding to the prompt. Although this was a straightforward question, students often did not discuss “attitudes toward technology,” but rather just “technology.” Teachers should stress throughout the course that students must focus on and fully address the prompt. They should be encouraged to read the prompt and problem-solve their answer prior to reading the documents. Teaching the five overarching themes outlined in the Course Description and encouraging students to use these themes in categorizing their response will aid them in developing a stronger thesis and appropriate groupings of the sources. Helping students write succinct and clear thesis statements that directly address and answer the prompt continues to be a necessity.

Teachers must also stress the importance of genuine analysis. Students, for the most part, understood the documents but did not use them effectively as evidence to support their claims. They asked for additional documents but did not explain why the documents requested would contribute to their theses. They noted the authors’ points of view but did not account for why the authors expressed their particular opinions. In each case, students lost credit for not expressly elucidating the information that they provided. In all cases, students needed to explicitly analyze the documents, points of view, and requests for additional references. In this vein, students should be encouraged to write thoughtful, structured, and analytical essays without resorting to “tricks” to gain points. The request for an additional document and the discussion of point of view should be an organic part of the essay, not tacked on to the introduction or mechanically appended in an additional paragraph at the end as an afterthought. Teachers should encourage historical thinking skills (the “habits of mind”) that are relevant to these tasks.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Students were expected to trace and explain the changes and continuities from 1914 to the present in how peoples and their leaders in one of three regions (the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or sub-Saharan Africa) created either distinct or unique national identities, using evidence from specific countries. For example, what would make a nation-state Turkish or Vietnamese or South African throughout the twentieth century?

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of the continuity/change-over-time question was 1.45 out of a possible 9 points, significantly lower than the mean of 3.02 in 2006 and 3.40 in 2005. One reason for this very low average score was the large number of responses that scored zero, though there were also many excellent essays. Students showed peoples’ desire for sovereignty within the global context of major world events and processes in the period from 1914 to the present. Specifically, they were able to explain how the desire for self-determination was often affected by European imperialism and the world wars. They often mentioned how reforms made by the new political leaders led to secular national identities, and they frequently referred to how religious beliefs affected national identity by unifying peoples into communities in a region—for example, Islam in the Middle East. The most common approach to an analysis of the formation of national identity focused on how

imperialism, the Cold War, and globalization expanded and limited political and economic options. Responses were distributed fairly evenly among the three regions of the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Generic Problems

Most students still had a difficult time explaining the historical importance of continuity in a time period. Although they attempted to address the concept of constancy, their statements tended to be very general and not connected to the question. This year, for example, students who mentioned the endurance of religion in a region but did not link that historical stability with the formation of national identity did not score points for continuity.

As on previous exams, many students could not correctly identify countries in a region. A substantial number incorrectly claimed that China, India, Japan, or Korea was in Southeast Asia, and that Algeria, Morocco, or Egypt was part of sub-Saharan Africa. A few students erroneously placed Afghanistan in the Middle East. Some also confused regions, countries, and cities. For instance, students commonly used “Pakistan” when they meant “Palestine,” and they regularly claimed that the continent of Africa is a country, or that Jerusalem is a state.

Writing a complete thesis also remained a challenge. Moreover, students persisted in just listing facts instead of using them as specific evidence to support the overall argument of the thesis.

Specific Problems

Many students simply were not prepared to identify and analyze the changes and continuities in the formation of national identity. They ignored the analysis task in the question and tried to write anything they knew about nationalism instead. These essays appeared to be “data dumps” instead of analytical arguments.

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?

Because students still struggle with continuity, teachers need to present models for analyzing continuity over time in specific time periods and across time periods. With more preparation and practice, students should be able to internalize their understanding of the importance of continuity as a contrast to historical changes and as connected to the global processes key to world history. Teachers should reinforce that restating the prompt is not an adequate thesis statement and keep working with students on writing a thesis that accurately and completely addresses the question asked, not the one the students want to answer. Students also could benefit from more practice with writing timed essays in response to questions that they have not seen before.

Overall, students need to develop their historical thinking skills. They have to recognize the task in the question asked, present an analytical argument that answers the essay questions on the examination, and address both change and continuity with specific evidence. Students must also be able to accurately identify regions according to the designations presented in the *AP World History Course Description*. Equally important is the geographic skill of distinguishing between regions, countries, and cities. Teachers should point out to students that the names of regions and

countries have changed over time and help them to be flexible and correct in their use of geographical names and terms in their writing.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The comparative question asked, “Within the period from 1450 to 1800, compare the processes (e.g., political, social, economic) of empire building in the Spanish Empire with the empire-building processes in ONE of the following: The Ottoman Empire OR The Russian Empire.” The heart of the question gets to the idea of empire *building*, not merely the existence of empire. As part of the core-scoring method, students were to develop an explicit thesis that compared and contrasted the process of empire building in Spain with either the Ottoman Empire or the Russian Empire. Second, students were to address similarities and differences in the development of the two empires chosen in their thesis. Third, evidence supporting empire building in both empires was required. Fourth, students were to provide a direct comparison between the two empires related to the process of empire building. Finally, in the basic core, students were instructed to analyze a reason for a similarity or difference between the two empires. Students who fulfilled all of these core points were eligible for up to 2 expanded core points by providing a well-written essay that could include, but not necessarily be limited to, a strong thesis, numerous examples of evidence, and/or several direct comparisons.

How well did students perform on this question?

Generally, students scored higher on the comparative essay than on the other two essays in 2007, and higher than in previous years. The mean score on the comparative question was 2.99 out of a possible 9 points, higher than the 2006 mean of 2.60 and the 2005 mean of 2.56. One of the factors in students’ improved performance may be that this was perceived as one of the more “mainstream” comparative questions since the inaugural AP World History Exam in 2002. In addition, students seem to have been taught to make specific direct comparisons rather than listing characteristics of each empire separately and leaving it to the Reader to infer similarities or differences. Almost all of the students who made a reasonable attempt to answer the question demonstrated knowledge of the Spanish and the Ottoman or Russian empires. More students—and logically, their teachers—appear to understand that the comparative question requires both comparisons and contrasts between two societies.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students misinterpreted the question and addressed similarities and differences between two empires but did not compare the *process of empire building*, with the result that they received no credit for the “thesis point.” Similarly, many students provided accurate facts about the empires addressed in the question but gave no data or examples in support of a comparison of the processes of empire building. Those students did not, therefore, earn core points for evidence. The analysis core point was another area where students appeared to struggle. They would make a comparison but not explain or elucidate it. Perhaps such failures can be attributed to the fact that this core point was introduced in the 2005-06 school year and may therefore be a new development to many teachers.

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 appears that teachers and students understand the purpose of the comparative question to a greater degree each year. On the whole, students seem to understand that the comparative question requires writing an essay that includes both comparisons and contrasts. A higher percentage of students than in the inaugural exam demonstrate the required ability to make a direct, relevant comparison between two societies. Here, teaching students to make comparisons has had results. Teachers now need to do additional instruction on explaining the reasons for a similarity or a difference. Based on the 2007 exam results, teachers should also emphasize that students must understand and address the prompt if they wish to perform well. Students need to use the five minutes of planning provided for this question to make sure that they have “parsed”—that is, analyzed critically—exactly what the prompt requires. AP World History teachers should continue to develop students’ thesis-writing and analytical skills.