



Student Performance Q&A: 2008 AP[®] European History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] European History were written by the Chief Reader, Jeffrey Hamilton of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. 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 analyze both causes and responses to the peasants' revolts in the German states from 1524 to 1526. Students were provided with 12 documents on which to base their response.

The purpose of the DBQ is to assess the degree to which students can analyze a variety of historical sources in order to construct a meaningful analytical essay. Students' essays are evaluated on the extent to which they meet the requirements specified in the core-scoring guidelines (thesis, discussion of documents, understanding of documents, support of thesis, grouping, point-of-view analysis). Students who met and exceeded these requirements could then earn additional points in the expanded core, which is based on holistic assessment of the essay.

How well did students perform on this question?

Overall student performance on this question was mixed. The mean score was 3.81 out of a possible 9 points.

In general, students understood the documents, and they were able to use them to respond to the terms of the question and to construct valid essays that met the criteria specified in the core-scoring guidelines. In fact, some essays demonstrated very high levels of analysis, earning credit in the expanded core.

Some students, however, failed to recognize that the prompt specified two distinct tasks. Consequently, they were unable to construct an acceptable thesis, since the scoring guidelines demand that students explicitly address all parts of the question. Failure to construct an acceptable thesis resulted in the loss of core points 1 and 4 (for thesis and support of thesis).

Many students were able to group the documents effectively to address both causes and responses, but many students failed at point-of-view analysis, either because they did not attempt it or because they attempted it and failed. However, there was a general trend of improvement in regard to point of view, as more students made successful attempts at point-of-view analysis, some of them quite sophisticated.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Since this was a document-based question, the thesis statement had to be explicit, responsive to the question's charges, and clearly drawn from the documents. It was common, however, for students to write a thesis that either focused on only one aspect of the prompt or was too generic and not sufficiently specific. Less commonly, a student would construct an appropriate thesis but then go on to support only one aspect (i.e., only causes or only responses).

Another area where students sometimes fell short was point-of-view analysis. Although essays frequently contained multiple attempts at point of view, students often relied on the formulaic use of words such as "bias" without making a meaningful attempt to explain *how* or *why* bias was present in the 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?

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. In addition, students need *continued* instruction in writing thesis statements that are specific enough to reflect an analytical approach to the documents. In other words, simply relying on general analytical categories that are presented without specific evidence from the documents is insufficient.

While there has been improvement in point-of-view analysis, students still need continued practice in this area. Students must make a reasonable attempt to explain *why* a source expresses a particular point of view, instead of simply making unsubstantiated claims about bias or credibility. Moreover, students could benefit from additional instruction in other means of demonstrating point of view, such as relating authorial point of view to the author's place in society and recognizing that different kinds of documents serve different kinds of purposes.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question dealt with a traditional topic, the rise of absolutism and state-building in early modern Europe (albeit in Eastern, rather than Western, Europe). Students had two tasks: to analyze the ways in which Russian society was reformed in the period of Peter the Great (1689–1725) through Catherine the Great (1762–1796) ("methods"), and to analyze how successful these

attempts at reform were (“degrees of success”). Students could treat the entire period from 1689 to 1796 as a single unit, or they could concentrate on the reigns of Peter and Catherine, either comparing or contrasting them.

This subject is covered in survey textbooks, although the career and policies of Peter the Great receive more detailed coverage than those of Catherine the Great. Catherine’s policies are frequently presented in a more fragmented manner; her domestic policies are often placed within the context of the Enlightenment, while her foreign policies are often discussed in the context of eighteenth-century balance-of-power politics. On rare occasions, the reigns of the two are placed side by side in one chapter.

How well did students perform on this question?

Overall student performance on this question was the strongest of all the free-response questions. The mean score was 3.86 out of a possible 9 points.

Students who chose this question tended to know enough information to be awarded at least some points. Even the least successful students remembered a few major aspects of the reigns of the two monarchs. Peter’s “Grand Embassy” of 1697 to 1698 was mentioned frequently, even if students’ characterization lacked accuracy; his requirement that the nobility acquire a more westernized appearance appeared in most essays, even if some of the details were incorrect; and his construction of St. Petersburg as a “window to the West” was frequently mentioned. Although many students struggled to recall much information about Catherine, many remembered her association with the *philosophes*, even if they tended to exaggerate her involvement with them. The strongest essays impressed Readers with their command of detail and analytical insight.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Aside from those responses that revealed a complete lack of understanding of the topic, weaker essays were distinguished by at least two factors:

1. *The failure to formulate a thesis that was responsive to the question.* A number of the weaker essays launched into an argument without providing its framework in a thesis paragraph; others often simply restated the question and sought to demonstrate competence by noting that Peter and Catherine adopted “various” methods of reform and that such methods enjoyed “varying” degrees of success. Both errors suggest that teachers need to devote more instructional time to teaching the basic elements of analytical writing, especially thesis construction.
2. *Greater difficulty when attempting to analyze the reforms of Catherine the Great.* The essays’ treatments of Catherine often indulged in sweeping generalizations or had serious factual errors (for example, a great many students erroneously stated that she freed the serfs). Many students only remembered her association with the partitions of Poland but could not establish a link between this action and the concept of reform; their solution appeared to be inclusion of factual material, such as territorial expansion, under the label of “reform” with no attempt to justify the inclusion. No explanation was usually offered in such circumstances but rather the inclusion was treated as self-evident. Some students clearly need greater instruction in the proper use of specific evidence in support of generalizations.

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?

Use class time to address areas of content not covered by the textbook (such as some of the policies of Catherine the Great). Provide constant and systematic instruction in the deconstruction of a question into its component parts. A group exercise in how to deconstruct free-response questions at the start of the school year, followed by similar exercises over the course of the term, will pay off at the time of the AP Exam.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The question was intended to assess students' knowledge of the causes of a significant social/demographic trend (rapid population growth) in eighteenth-century Europe that had profound consequences both during that century and afterwards. Students had two tasks: first to identify in detail ("describe") some major causes of population growth, and second to explain how those changes contributed to population growth ("analyze"). The question thus tested students' ability to analyze causal links and multiple contributing causes.

How well did students perform on this question?

Overall student performance on this question was weak. The mean score was 2.40 out of a possible 9 points. Many students clearly understood the intent of the question and clearly grasped the sort of specifics that would be appropriate, but they showed a very shaky grasp of chronology, discussing developments and causes that were more often from the nineteenth century rather than the eighteenth.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was chronological; students often discussed developments from the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century (such as the invention of the railroad) as if they had occurred in the eighteenth century. Many students concentrated almost solely on Britain without acknowledging that they were doing so. Many students failed to make explicit links between cause and effect; they merely mentioned a development and left it to the Readers to infer a connection to population growth. Few essays dealt with the spread of New World food crops (such as maize and potatoes), which continued into the eighteenth century and was an important factor in population growth. Many essays consisted almost entirely of extremely broad generalizations ("people were better fed"), with no specifics drawn from the eighteenth century. Many essays lacked a thesis more specific than a statement to the effect that there were "many causes" for population growth.

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 vital that students be given a strong grounding in chronology. In this instance, the distinction between the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century was not an arbitrary one, and students need to be alert to the differences between one century and another. Students also need to be taught how to construct a thesis that is more than a highly generalized paraphrase of the question. Many students need a firmer grounding in the art of supporting a generalized argument with specific pieces of evidence.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The question instructed students to analyze (determine the components) the challenges (problems, solutions, consequences) faced by Western Europe during the period corresponding to the end of the Second World War to the end of the Cold War (1945–1989). Students were required to consider economic and social actions taken by Western European nations *only*, not by the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. In creating cohesive, analytical essays, students could choose from many topics, such as the rebuilding of Western Europe after the Second World War, economic integration, women’s roles in the labor force, the rise of the welfare state, massive expansion of access to higher education, the redefined family, the youth rebellion, and the influence of science and technology on the economy and society.

How well did students perform on this question?

Overall student performance on this question was mixed. The mean score was 3.25 out of a possible 9 points.

Students who responded within the terms of the question were able to cite and analyze numerous economic developments and some social developments. Those who chose their examples purposefully often wrote cohesive essays that analyzed challenges appropriately within the context of the postwar period through the Cold War era. Many students chose unrelated challenges that, while responding successfully to the tasks, were less cohesive than stronger essays.

A large number of essays provided evidence that students were unsure of the distinctions between social and political events and conditions. Social and economic categories were also frequently conflated, but in that case the overlap was often reasonable. Stronger essays were analytical and used specific, multiple examples to support each assertion. Such essays cited developments in specific countries, most often Great Britain, Germany, and France, but other Western European nations as well.

Successful responses demonstrated solid essay-writing skills: explicit and analytical thesis statements, introduction of the social and economic concepts required by the prompt, and engagement with the time period and geographic conditions of the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common student errors included misinterpretation of the terms of the prompt, especially the meanings of “economic and social challenges,” as well as the geographic description of Western Europe. Faulty chronological reasoning contributed to the frequent use of inappropriate evidence. Overgeneralized responses made assertions that went back to the First World War and the Great Depression or devolved into discussions of political and military aspects of the Cold War. Weaker essays often used very broad generalizations that were not specific to time, place, or events and most often used evidence as narrative, without meaningful analysis. These essays frequently cited inappropriate examples from the United States or the Soviet Union. Some essays were essentially discussions of the diplomatic and political developments of the Cold War and were only tangentially related to the prompt.

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 would benefit from class assignments and assessments that require precise and explicit responses to common prompts, such as the terms included in this question. Chronological reasoning, analysis of cause and effect, and inclusion of all essential categories, such as social and economic, are essential components of successful responses.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question gave students two tasks: first to identify reasons (causes) for changes that occurred in European women’s lives in the nineteenth century, and second to explain how those reasons led to particular changes. An implicit task was to identify some economic, political, or social changes that occurred in women’s lives during that time period. The wording of the question left open the possibility of discussing anything from the pre-nineteenth-century period that might have had an impact on the lives of women in the nineteenth century, but the intent was for students to focus on causal links between social, political, and economic developments and the lives of women.

How well did students perform on this question?

Overall student performance on this question was weak. The mean score was 2.47 out of a possible 9 points. There were some excellent essays, but most students knew very little about the topic. Many responses lacked any sense of chronology and often discussed both World Wars and even the Cold War. Students displayed very little specific knowledge about women’s history in nineteenth-century Europe. Many essays consisted almost entirely of generalities about “improvements”; others only offered specific evidence from United States history.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students showed a nearly complete lack of appropriate historical knowledge. Even many of the better answers were highly simplistic. Many did not understand the meaning of the terms “political” or “social” and thus included all sorts of material under those labels. It was clear that

most students had not been taught much, if any, social history. Many students erroneously asserted that women gained the “right to vote” generally in the nineteenth century or that women never worked outside the home prior to the Industrial Revolution.

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 a much better sense of chronology. They also need to be better instructed in women’s history, which will remain a key component of the AP European History course. Many textbooks deal with women’s history in a fragmentary fashion, so teachers will have to use supplementary materials to give students a more comprehensive understanding.

As always, students should be taught to carefully read the question and think about all of its parts before crafting their answers.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze the major factors responsible for the rise of anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century Europe. Students were expected to address at least two factors. They were also expected to assess causality by analyzing the reasons for the rise of anti-Semitism, not simply describing them. Student responses could range from discussions of broad developments (nationalism, Social Darwinism, Jewish migration, economic crises, etc.) to specific events and individuals (the Dreyfus Affair, Herbert Spencer, Theodor Herzl, etc.). Students were expected not only to address the big picture but also to provide specific evidence that could be used to substantiate their major claims. In other words, if Social Darwinism or nationalism was cited as a major factor in the thesis statement, students needed to go beyond a general discussion of these phenomena to gain credit for evidence. In addressing Social Darwinism, for example, they could examine the ways in which Darwin’s ideas were manipulated by thinkers like Herbert Spencer.

How well did students perform on this question?

Overall student performance on this question was very weak. The mean score was 2.43 out of a possible 9 points.

Most students understood the main task of the question, and most major textbooks have full sections that deal with the issue in varying degrees of thoroughness. While a few students produced very fine essays, many did not. The large number of low scores was due primarily to the fact that many responses were almost entirely off topic (largely about Hitler) or based solely on generalizations. That said, most students who responded to the essay were able to formulate a thesis, and many had a basic sense, at least, of how one might begin to discuss causality. Better essays displayed a fine balance between nuanced argument and the inclusion of specific evidence and details. Students who did perform well tended to write about nationalism, Social Darwinism, and the Dreyfus Affair. A number of very good essays discussed specific details about the economic status of Jews, and a few excellent essays analyzed cultural factors (such as literature) that were responsible for the rise of anti-Semitic ideas in the nineteenth century.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students seemed unfamiliar with what the term “nineteenth century” means, resulting in a number of essays that ended up being entirely off topic (primarily about the pre-1800 period or the twentieth century). In many instances, possibly due to the fact that they just did not know very much about nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, students incorporated much information that was largely irrelevant (the expulsion of Jews from England, France, and the Iberian Peninsula; the alleged poisoning of wells during the Black Death; etc.) Occasionally, students who produced essays in the stronger categories were successful at illustrating points of continuity between these earlier forms of anti-Semitism and certain nineteenth-century developments. The most frequent use of evidence drawn from outside the nineteenth century related to the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. In the majority of cases, these essays scored in the lowest categories.

A common student error related to the inability to be precise. A number of students attempted to answer the question with ahistorical generalizations that were, in some cases, based on very basic knowledge about anti-Semitism or faulty cultural stereotypes. Students who did deal with the nineteenth century often missed the significance of Jewish Emancipation and assumed that Jews continued to be deprived of political and legal rights in all countries during the period. Very few students dealt with the shift from anti-Judaism (prejudice and stereotyping based on religious differences) to anti-Semitism (prejudice and stereotyping based on supposed racial characteristics).

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 be reminded to pay careful attention to what the prompt asks of them. It is imperative that they understand historical periodization, learn how to distinguish the nineteenth from the twentieth century, and so on. They should also be reminded that they will not succeed on the exam if they simply try to make what they know fit the question. Students need to think carefully about the types of evidence they incorporate into their responses. In most instances, generalizations do not suffice to substantiate major arguments. To rectify this problem, students need to gain more practice in backing up their claims with specific details. Finally, students should be encouraged to think more about how they analyze why certain events happened or why particular developments occurred. Causality must be emphasized to help students meet the analytical challenges they are likely to face on the exam.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to analyze how Enlightenment views concerning society, politics, and human nature were challenged both during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods and after 1815. The prompt implicitly required students to have an understanding of pre-Revolutionary Enlightenment thought on the subjects of society, politics, and human nature, and of the period from 1789 to 1815. They were expected to analyze the challenges to these Enlightenment views presented by the events of the period, both in the specific time frame of 1789–1815 and afterwards. However, most students read the question as intending to cover only

the period 1789–1815, and this was considered a reasonable reading. Hence, it was possible to score in the top category without referring to the post-1815 period, though many stronger essays did discuss events after Napoleon’s fall.

How well did students perform on this question?

Overall student performance on this question was mixed. The mean score was 3.05 out of a possible 9 points. Some students did not clearly address Enlightenment views on the three subjects in their analysis, or they tended to conflate Enlightenment views, especially when addressing human nature. Many students discussed rather than analyzed how Enlightenment views were challenged by the events of 1789–1815.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Of the three views, students had the most difficulty with the Enlightenment view of human nature. True analysis, as opposed to description/discussion, was found only in the highest-scoring essays. Some students attached correct Enlightenment views to the wrong Enlightenment thinker. Some referred to Freud and Nietzsche as post-1815 responses to the French Revolution, without clearly linking them to the French Revolution.

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 need to stress to students the importance of following the prompts of the question. Also, students need to have an understanding of the difference between verbs such as “analyze” and “discuss” and how these verbs change the task that is stated in the prompt.