



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

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] Psychology were written by the Chief Reader, Jane Halonen of the University of West Florida in Pensacola. 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 question presented the scenario of a couple anticipating the birth of their first child as the context for application of psychological concepts. Although the focus of the question was developmental in nature, it required students to understand and apply theory and research from the areas of operant conditioning, social learning theory, attachment, and parenting.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students achieved a mean score of 3.75 out of a possible 8 points. Scores covered the entire range, which suggests that the question performed well, and that students generally were able to answer it.

What were common student errors or omissions?

This question required students to provide specific examples of actions parents might take, based upon the theories presented, to produce positive outcomes for their child. Although students scored relatively well on this question, some students found it difficult to relate specific examples of concepts to concrete outcomes.

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?

Like other questions in recent years, this question required not only knowledge of specific concepts but also the ability to apply the concepts and to relate them to other phenomena. Thus, teachers must prepare students not only to define terms but to use concepts.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to apply their knowledge of research. The question presented the abstract of a research study and asked students to identify the components of the study (control group, deception, operational definition, hypothesis, debriefing). Finally, the question asked students to hypothesize how particular cognitive and motivational concepts could influence the outcome of the study.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed well on this question. The mean score was 3.92 out of a possible 7 points, and the scores were well distributed.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students experienced difficulty in connecting theoretical notions (in cognition and motivation) to the specific concepts occurring in the research study.

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?

Like the first question, this question required students to go beyond definition or identification of terms to relate concepts to the content of a research study. The question further required connection of aspects of the study to a specific theory in cognition and motivation. Thus, teachers should be ensuring that students not only know terminology but that they can also use critical thought to relate basic concepts to broader issues.