



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

The following comments on the 2008 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 "Caigo sobre unas manos," a 25-line poem by Antonio Gamoneda. Students were asked to analyze the theme of maternal love 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 total exam score (the multiple-choice section counts for the remaining 40 percent). Each question receives two separate scores. The first, for the content of the analysis, counts for 70 percent of the essay's score; the second, for language, counts for 30 percent.

The mean score for content for the Standard Group* of students was 5.53 out of 9 possible points, almost a full point higher than the mean score of 4.79 in 2007. For the Total Group, the mean score for content was 5.27, again close to a full point higher than the mean score of 4.53 for this group in 2007.

* The Standard Group does not include students who speak Spanish 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.

With respect to the scores for language on question 1, the mean score for the Standard Group was 3.29 out of 5 possible points, only a very small decrease from the group's mean score of 3.38 in 2007. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.54, a similar slight drop when compared to the same score from the previous year (3.61). For both the Standard Group and the Total Group, question 1 represented the highest mean score for language of the three questions on this year's exam,

The poem selected for the poetry analysis question this year is of medium length. Its form and content—including vocabulary, poetic syntax, and imagery—were for the most part accessible to students. The poem is notable for its nontraditional structure and richness and abundance of poetic language and devices; it presents intricate imagery communicated in simple, everyday language. These aspects posed a challenge to students attempting to discuss a great variety of rhetorical figures in a well-organized essay. The well-worn theme of maternal love, because it was a familiar one, proved accessible to students with differing levels of analytical ability. The theme was made concrete by the poem's use of images, especially “las manos y la noche.”

What were common student errors or omissions?

Errors and omissions related to the requirements of the question included the following:

- Discussing the theme of maternal love without focusing on the question and/or the poem itself
- Paraphrasing the poem in a descriptive way rather than analyzing its theme
- 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 as it relates to the poem's content
- Demonstrating 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?

The poetry question appears on the AP Spanish Literature Exam every year. The text is always a poem that does not come from the required reading list. Students have the advantage because they are working with the text before them while they consider, plan, and write their responses. Reading new poems and practicing ways to respond to the same type of prompt under the same conditions and time constraints of the AP Exam will help students to refine their skills and better answer the poetry question. This type of exercise will also help students learn 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 then to read the poem thoroughly with the question in mind. Another useful strategy is to encourage students to underline or circle the important words or directions in the prompt, such as “maternal love,” how the poetic devices and language communicate this theme, and the need for specific supporting examples from the poem itself. Doing this type of exercise trains students to remember to fully address the question. Teach students to set aside a few minutes to outline their responses, as well as to leave a few minutes at the end to proofread, edit, and/or correct elements of their work.

Teachers can assist their students by:

- Having small groups or the entire class share thoughts concerning the poem's theme, the poetic language and devices employed, and the form of the poem in a prewriting phase
- Working routinely with and helping students to better understand the literary vocabulary itself, 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
- Having students do peer review as part of the editing process

Question 2: Thematic Analysis

What was the intent of this question?

In the thematic analysis, two types of questions are possible: one type involves the comparison of a given theme or topic in two works from the required reading list; the second is an analysis of a given theme in one work from the reading list. This year's question was of the latter type. Students were asked to write an essay analyzing the treatment of the theme of personal identity in one work chosen from a list of four titles: Borges's "El sur," Allende's "Dos palabras," "Autorretrato" by Castellanos, and "A Julia de Burgos" by Burgos. The theme of identity may be approached from diverse perspectives: self-definition and transformation, often achieved through struggle; gender identification; the contrast between the private and the public self; and the presentation or contrast of the self to/with other individuals or society at large. All of 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 content score was 4.49 out of 9 possible points, compared to a mean score of 4.07 on the 2007 exam. The mean content score for the Total Group was 4.04, slightly higher than the mean score of 3.89 in 2007.

The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3 out of 5 possible points, which was all but identical to the group's mean score on the 2007 exam (3.04). The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.03, somewhat lower than this group's mean score for the previous year (3.3).

For both the Standard and Total Groups, the mean content and language scores for question 2 were the lowest mean content and language scores of the three questions on this year's 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 analyzing the theme of personal identity in "Autorretrato" or "A Julia de Burgos," because the task required them to have a strong recall of a poem (rather than a narrative text with a plot). The theme of identity in these two works is communicated in part through specific uses of poetic language, devices, and form; this may have posed a challenge for students to discuss without having the text in front of them. Students favored using the Borges story to answer this question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors and omissions included the following:

- Inability to deal with the theme of personal identity in the chosen text
- Superficial development of the theme
- Excessive plot summary and minimal analysis
- Insufficient supporting examples from the text in question
- Vague or general responses that seemed to indicate that students were not familiar with the work
- Erroneous and/or superfluous 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—in this case, the theme of identity in one work selected from the four texts listed—with supporting examples from the work in question. The best essays contain specific examples to support the students' ideas, and the ideas are presented in a systematic, explicit, and logical manner. It is imperative that students clearly state which text they are treating and that they limit their responses to that work.

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

- Give students in-class writing assignments that provide experience with all aspects of essay composition: prewriting, outlining, writing, proofreading, and editing
- Ask students, in addition to doing peer editing, to act as peer editors for their own essays, an exercise that can help them recognize problems in their own essays and refine their essay-writing skills
- Help students learn to stay focused on the topic at hand by routinely pointing out content that might be superfluous or irrelevant
- Teach students how to develop and properly support their ideas in the analysis at hand
- Teach students to distinguish analysis from mere paraphrasing or plot summary

The strategies given on the preceding pages for improving student performance on the poetry analysis question also work well for the thematic analysis question.

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 the analysis of an excerpt from a work on the reading list with two separate questions to answer. This year's question was of the latter type. It was based on a passage taken from chapter 1 of Cervantes' *El ingenioso hidalgo, don Quijote de la Mancha*. In part (a) students were asked to analyze the importance of names and titles in the passage. In part (b) they were asked to explain how the author uses humor in the passage and to explain the importance of humor in the rest of the work.

How well did students perform on this question?

Last year's question was an analysis of a critical commentary about *El burlador de Sevilla*, and the highest possible content score was 9 points. On this year's exam, because the question had two parts to answer, the highest possible content score was 10 points (representing 5 possible points for each of the two parts of the question.) For the Standard Group the mean content score was 5.81, the highest mean content score for this group on this exam. The same held true for the Total Group, whose mean content score was 5.29.

For the Standard Group the mean language score this year was 3.2 out of 5 possible points; this score was almost half a point higher than the 2007 mean score of 2.86. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.27, higher than the 2007 mean score of 3.07, although not as much of an increase.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The AP Spanish Literature reading list requires students to read several chapters of Cervantes' novel. Students who had not read the selected chapters in their entirety were unable to address the question competently, and they often left their exam booklets blank.

Common errors and omissions included the following:

- Paraphrasing or summarizing the passage in lieu of textual analysis
- Enumerating names and titles without analyzing their importance
- Listing examples of humor in the rest of the work without explaining their importance
- Failing to refer specifically to the passage
- Failing to understand the humor in Cervantes' text
- Including superfluous or erroneous statements
- Giving a prepared overview of Cervantes and/or *El ingenioso hidalgo, don Quijote de la Mancha* with limited connection to either of the questions

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 to help students better prepare for and perform well on the poetry analysis and thematic analysis questions, additional suggestions for the text analysis question are:

- Give students two-part questions based on a number of texts on the required reading list in order to provide them with experience doing this type of analysis of an excerpt. At some point or points during the year, have students answer this type of question under conditions and time constraints that are similar to those of the AP Spanish Literature Exam.
- Encourage students to highlight or circle important words or concepts in the questions
- Teach students how to write effective thesis statements and conclusions
- Help students develop a list of vocabulary, expressions, and transitional phrases so that they will learn how to link sentences and paragraphs while integrating comments of an analytical nature as opposed to writing anecdotal commentaries

Again, since the text analysis question can be based on any work on the required reading list, it is essential that students read each work completely. Teachers can further assist students by showing them how to do a close reading of all of the works, including consideration of vocabulary, linguistic, and/or stylistic features regardless of the genre.