



Student Performance Q&A:

2008 AP[®] World History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] World History were written by the Chief Reader, Merry Wiesner-Hanks of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee; Sharon Cohen of Springbrook High School in Silver Spring, Maryland; Joseph (Jay) Harmon of Cypress Woods High School in Cypress, Texas; and Mee-Ae Kim of The College of Idaho in Caldwell, Idaho. 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?

For the document-based question, students were expected to analyze factors that shaped the modern Olympic movement in the context of major events in the twentieth century.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of 2.03 out of a possible 9 points was dramatically lower than in the two previous years. The mean score in 2007 was 2.84; in 2006, 3.27.

The primary reason for the low score was that many students did not answer the question that had been asked and instead inverted it; that is, they answered a question about the effects of the Olympics on the twentieth century. On the positive side, a majority of the essays provided a thesis listing two or more factors that shaped the modern Olympic movement. Many essays addressed all 10 documents and showed understanding of the meaning of 9 documents. Most essays included multiple groupings of the 10 sources; the common groupings were political (nationalism), economic (commercialism), and social (feminism), but students also used other types of groupings that helped to answer the question. They were particularly effective in connecting the Olympics with nationalism. Unsurprisingly, most students showed a familiarity with the modern Olympic movement from 1892 to 2002, although their background knowledge sometimes contributed to lengthy answers that did not address the question effectively.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students did not answer the question actually asked about the “factors that shaped the modern Olympic movement” but instead addressed the inverse of that question and described the effects of the Olympics on society. In many of the essays, students also did not seem to be aware that they had shifted to using the documents as evidence to answer the inverse of the question, which made it impossible for them to earn any evidence points. For example, some used evidence from the documents to address how the Olympics *caused* nationalism or feminism rather than how the Olympics were *shaped or affected* by these global processes. In addition, many students merely discussed individual documents as they related to the general topic of the Olympics instead of using them as evidence to analyze factors that shaped the modern Olympic movement.

Surprisingly, students showed misunderstanding of some documents, perhaps because they did not read the dates when the documents had been created. For example, many students claimed that document 3, the 1956 memoir of a British Olympic official about the actions of the Nazi ski team at the 1936 games, was created during the time of declared hostilities between Germany and Great Britain in the Second World War.

Students may have read the documents too quickly as well. For example, many students showed misunderstanding of the graph in document 9. The graph explicitly states that it shows “fees paid to the International Olympic Committee for international TV and radio broadcast rights.” Instead, students interpreted it as representing the amount of advertising sold. Many students also read the documents literally and did not think about them. For example, they merely repeated the words in document 6, the 1980 Soviet Olympic Organizing Committee press release, about the Soviet Union being “a beacon of peace, democracy, and social progress.”

Many students did not explicitly group the documents. They often discussed two documents sequentially that could indeed be grouped (such as documents 2 and 8, both of which include information about women’s participation in the Olympics) but then did not include any sort of topical or linking sentence that explained how the two were related.

This year, there again was little analysis of point of view, which was required for only two documents. When students did attempt to analyze point of view, the analysis was often wrong or incompletely explained. Some essays merely stated erroneously that it was “obvious” what the point of view was due to the gender or nationality of the author. Statistics were not questioned but assumed to be accurate.

Many students also did not attempt to identify and explain why an additional document would help assess the factors shaping the modern Olympics. When students did identify an additional document, the explanation was vague or not tied to factors affecting the Olympics.

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 emphasize the importance of answering the question that is on the exam, not a different question created by the student. They should give students practice reading the directions that precede the question, show students how the directions relate to each point of the

scoring guidelines, and guide students in outlining the steps for analyzing and answering the question.

In general, students need practice with reading primary sources and graphs carefully to understand the meaning of the source in its historical context. Teachers should help students see how the historical context provided in the attribution line or internally within the text of the document will help them understand the meaning and point of view in the document. Students should be given practice in distinguishing between a summary of the documents and an explanation of the documents' meaning, the "so what?" question.

Students continue to view the word "bias" as invariably reflecting something negative, so it would be helpful to avoid that word completely and use "perspective" or "point of view" when teaching students how to analyze tone or other aspects of the documents. Students also need to practice analyzing visuals like photographs and finding point of view in them. The analysis of point of view often works best when integrated into the analysis of the document for evidence to support the thesis, not tacked on as a separate issue toward the end of the essay.

All of the sources printed in the exam booklet for the document-based question were chosen to provide evidence to answer the question; therefore, all of the documents had to be addressed and analyzed, not just quoted. Encourage students to cite the document number when quoting from a document in their essays. Teachers could let students apply the scoring guidelines to sample essays to see how essays with "good writing" score low if analysis of the documents is incomplete.

Although specific outside knowledge is not required to answer the document-based question, students should be encouraged to link the world history themes they have learned in the course, to provide historical context for their primary source analysis. This does not, however, mean that students should be encouraged to throw in everything they know about the topic. To this end, teachers can use the sample essays to help students see how those essays that received a high score give only background historical information that is pertinent to the question.

Teachers should discourage students from requesting the additional document at the end of the essay, because the conclusion might need to stand in for the essay's thesis if the thesis at the beginning is inadequate. If the last paragraph is devoted to the request for an additional document and an explanation of its usefulness, the student may miss a second chance to earn the thesis point. For the additional document, *formulaic requests do not work*; asking for a female or a lower-class perspective, for example, without explaining how that additional perspective could help answer the question and/or contribute to the analysis of the other documents does not show a student's mastery of this skill. The rationale or justification for the requested additional document must relate back to the question.

Teachers could work with colleagues in the English department to teach students vocabulary that helps demonstrate analysis of the documents and supplies transitions in the argumentation of the essay (e.g., terms such as "evidence," "affirm," "credit," and "discredit"). Students could be shown how topic sentences can be used to justify groupings and to relate evidence to the thesis, and also how closing sentences can be used to explain how the documents help to answer the question.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The continuity and change-over-time question asked: “Analyze the changes and continuities in commerce in the Indian Ocean region from 650 C.E. to 1750 C.E.” The intent of this question was to have students explain the reasons for the changes and continuities in commerce in the Indian Ocean region during those 1100 years. The focus of the question, Indian Ocean trade in that time period, is a “mainstream” topic in the AP World History course.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.6 out of a possible 9 points, significantly higher than it had been last year, though lower than in 2006. The mean score in 2007 was 1.45; in 2006, 3.02.

Students who understood the purpose of the question generally did well on the essay, and many students had a large amount of factual knowledge. They knew something about the commodities traded, especially spices, and something about the technology of commerce, including ships. They also had a basic knowledge of the geography of the area, which was very encouraging. Many included information about the spread of Islam and about Zheng He’s voyages. Many mentioned the first European voyages to the region. Better essays were quite sophisticated in their handling of the question, and they showed an ability to address issues of causation. The better essays also addressed the issue of continuity more fully than those in years past and linked the continuities discussed more clearly with the issue of commerce, rather than just mentioning them. For example, good essays did not simply say that the spread of Islam was a continuity but explained “why” in their discussion of the role of Muslim merchants. Thus, many students appeared to be better trained in analysis, for which teachers should be commended.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was not providing a thesis that fully addressed the question or writing a thesis that simply restated the question; “There were many changes and continuities in commerce in the Indian Ocean region from 650 to 1750” was *not* an acceptable thesis. As in previous years, to receive the thesis point, a student’s thesis needed to address both changes *and* continuities. In many cases, students attempted a thesis that addressed only changes but not continuities, such as: “There were many changes in the technology and participants in commerce in the Indian Ocean trade.” An acceptable thesis included both: “There were changes in technology and the participants in commerce but continuities in some of the materials traded in the Indian Ocean region from 650 to 1750.”

Another frequent error was that students provided snapshots of items exchanged in the Indian Ocean region in this era, or of the participants in merchant activity, without noting whether these were an example of change or of continuity. They thus listed facts without using them as specific evidence to support the overall argument of the thesis.

Students also had difficulty viewing the developments in the Indian Ocean region that they discussed as a *process*, and many did not attempt any analysis at all. Those who did attempt analysis sometimes tried to fit their evidence into a formulaic “beginning, middle, end” pattern that

did not work well with this year's question and often kept them from seeing or analyzing continuities.

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 emphasize that the continuity and change-over-time question is indeed about changes and continuities. Many essays addressed only changes, despite the explicit directions both in the question and in the bulleted directions above the question in the exam booklet. Because students still struggle with continuity, teachers need to present models for analyzing this, both within specific time periods and across very long periods. To do this, teachers will have to step beyond the textbook, since most textbooks do not address issues of long-term continuities very well.

Those who are still teaching their students a “beginning, middle, end” formula for writing continuity and change-over-time essays should stop doing so. Snapshots of history at the beginning, middle, and end of a given time period do not address the *process* of change or encourage students to analyze the reasons for those processes; such a formula also works against encouraging students' ability to address continuities.

Teachers should develop students' skills in writing theses that address all parts of the question and attain a level of specificity. Students need more training in historical-thinking skills. They need to be able to recognize the task in the question that has been asked (in this case, “analyze”) and present an argument that answers the essay with specific evidence. This year students included a comparatively large amount of specific evidence when answering the question, but fewer were able to demonstrate how that evidence linked with historical processes.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The comparative question asked: Compare the emergence of nation-states in nineteenth-century Latin America with the emergence of nation-states in ONE of the following regions in the twentieth century.

- Sub-Saharan Africa
- The Middle East

The question directed students to compare the *emergence* of the nation-states, not to compare long-term nation building. Many students focused on the latter.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 1.2, significantly lower than it has ever been. The mean score in 2007 was a relatively high 2.99; in 2006, it was 2.6.

In part, the low score was because a very large percentage of students did not answer, wrote off-topic responses, or merely paraphrased the question. (More than half of the students received a score of 0 or did not attempt to answer this question.) Students who made a reasonable attempt to answer the question seemed to understand that the essay had to provide both similarities *and*

differences between Latin America and either the Middle East or sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, many students effectively demonstrated basic knowledge of the regions. Of the three regions, students tended to do best in understanding nineteenth-century Latin America. Many linked European Enlightenment ideas and the French Revolution to the Haitian Revolution and independence movements in mainland Latin America.

The basic core scoring guidelines had five components: (1) the thesis had to address explicitly a similarity or a difference in the emergence of nation-states in Latin America with the emergence of nation-states in either the Middle East or sub-Saharan Africa; (2) students had to address both similarities and differences for the two regions; (3) evidence for both regions supporting the emergence of nation-states was required; (4) students were to provide a direct comparison of the process of nation building; and (5) students were instructed to analyze a reason for a similarity or a difference between the two regions. Students who successfully fulfilled these core points became eligible for up to 2 expanded points by writing an essay that exceeded the requirements of the core points in one or more ways.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although students who made a reasonable attempt to write the essay had a general grasp of the issues, they were hindered by a lack of clarity concerning *emerging* nation-states and the differences in centuries, nineteenth for Latin America and twentieth for the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Students generally attempted to address both similarities and differences in their thesis; most tended to do well in providing either similarities or differences, but rarely both. Many were also confused about terminology: “nation-state,” “nationalism,” “colonialism,” “imperialism,” and “decolonization” were often poorly understood.

Students tended to struggle with the complexities of twentieth-century Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, students often made vague generalizations about entire regions without offering specific supporting evidence. Some students focused on social, political, and economic categories without adequately providing factual information that supported the use of these categories in comparing emerging nation-states. While this model can be effective, it is inappropriate without supporting evidence.

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?

This year an acceptable thesis could address *either* similarity *or* difference; but the trend has generally favored a thesis that addresses *both*, and teachers and students should be prepared to include both. For students to receive credit for a direct comparison, they had to provide specific examples and not vague or generic generalizations. For students to receive credit for analysis, they had to explain the causes of similarities and differences. Students need training in thinking and writing about comparisons that tackle complicated and challenging concepts. In addition, students seem unprepared to present factual evidence, particularly from the twentieth century.

Given the huge number of students who made no attempt to answer the question, it is important to note that teachers need to help students manage their time more effectively. Students can benefit from practice with writing timed essays when they do not know the subject of the question ahead of time.