CollegeBoard AP

Student Performance Q&A:

2009 AP® English Language and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP® English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, Gary L. Hatch of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. 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?

The synthesis question measures students' ability to develop a position on a given topic by referring to sources. This question also requires that students demonstrate an ability to summarize, paraphrase, and quote properly from these sources and to cite them accurately. This year's question asked students to use at least three of eight provided sources to develop a position about what issues should be considered most important in making decisions about space exploration. Many students had some background knowledge and may have formed some preliminary opinions on the issue of space exploration, but to write on this topic successfully, they had to rely on the information provided in the eight sources. In addition to several textual sources, students were also provided with two visual sources, a photograph of a NASA rocket at the launch pad and information about the federal budget, presented both as a pie chart and in a table.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.83 out of a possible 9 points. This was higher than last year's performance on the synthesis question, which had a mean of 4.62. Students generally found this question to be accessible, even though they still had to rely primarily on the sources for detailed information about space exploration. Students wrote long essays, often twice as long as the essays they wrote for the other two questions; however, longer essays didn't necessarily equate with better essays. Successful essays demonstrated students' ability to control the source material and to develop their own position in relation to the topic rather than merely to report information they had learned from the sources. Strong essays were able to identify some of the competing values in space exploration (costs versus benefits) and weigh these against one another as considerations.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common student errors were similar to those seen in the responses written for the synthesis question in the first two years it appeared on the exam:

- Instead of using the sources to develop a position on what issues should be considered most important in making decisions about space exploration, students merely repeated information from the sources. Some students responded to the sources or attempted to evaluate them without synthesizing. Some students classified them into pro or con categories without developing a position

- In some cases, although students addressed the prompt, they allowed the sources to drive the development of their position. Exam Readers saw many papers in which students attempted to follow the formula of the five-paragraph theme: introduction, three paragraphs (with one source per paragraph), and formulaic conclusion. Such essays demonstrated little thought on the students' part and little ability to own the topic.

- Some students failed to respond to the specific tasks required by this prompt and instead wrote essays for or against space exploration. After three years, the synthesis question is no longer new, and Readers are noticing two dominant types: argumentative synthesis and explanatory synthesis. The difference doesn't lie as much in the type of claim the student presents but rather in how the sources are used. In an argumentative synthesis (such as last year's question on whether the penny coin should be discontinued), the sources present various perspectives on a controversial issue. Students are then asked to develop a position in response to these competing claims. In an explanatory synthesis (such as this year's question), the sources provide information about different aspects of the topic but aren't necessarily presenting competing claims. In this type of synthesis, students are required to use the information from the sources to identify common themes or features of the topic and examine these in relation to one another.

- Often, students merely asserted a position or presented a quotation as self-evident proof without providing any further explanation or analysis.

- In previous years it was rare to find otherwise adequately written essays that didn't use any form of citation. But for some reason, although it is still infrequent, Readers did find a few examples of otherwise adequately written essays that didn't make even a minimal attempt to cite their sources.

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 provide students with frequent opportunities to use source material in their writing. This doesn't mean teaching the traditional research paper; instead, it means that teachers need to help students recognize that most public writing engages a variety of sources.

- Teachers need to help students analyze the various ways in which writers use sources in developing their positions. Students should realize that, in addition to using sources to support a position or illustrate a point, they can use sources to extend or counter others' ideas, to represent different positions, or to make connections among ideas. Sources can provide students with useful definitions, models, or analytical frameworks.

- Teachers should help students understand the common moves writers use to incorporate sources into their prose. Students need to learn how to provide a framework for a source by introducing it, presenting it (as quotation, summary, or paraphrase), citing it properly, and then explaining it as part of the student's own argument. Teachers need to help students avoid merely inserting a long quotation as a substitute for their own writing.

- Teachers should make students aware of the purpose of citation systems as well as their mechanics. Students need to learn how to use sources responsibly and ethically. In practicing for the exam, it may help to have students use the method described in the question (Source A, Source B, etc.), but students should become familiar with more widely accepted forms of citation, such as MLA or APA styles.

- Teachers can ensure that students address a wide range of visual sources: paintings, cartoons and other drawings, photographs, or visual representations of data. They can demonstrate to students the indeterminacy of many images and help them recognize that an image may have multiple meanings or uses as a source.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to read and analyze two passages taken from biologist Edward O. Wilson's book *The Future of Life* in which he satirizes the language of two diametrically opposed political factions. Students were then asked to write an essay analyzing how Wilson's satire illustrates the unproductive nature of these discussions.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.24 out of a possible 9 points. In general, students found the passages accessible. Most could recognize what Wilson was doing, but some struggled to describe *how* he was doing it. Successful essays noted the similar structures of the passages, which appeared side by side, and paid particular attention to how both passages used name-calling, over-the-top accusations, and hyperbolic examples. Some students referred to the irony of the juxtaposition of the two passages. Many students discussed how Wilson's satire typifies political discourse in a system dominated by two major parties, a system in which the media often present such extreme and unreasonable positions in split-screen format.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most of the students' difficulties in responding to these passages came from a misreading of Wilson's tone and an inability to explain in specific terms what Wilson was doing. Even though the prompt identified the passages as satire, some students had difficulty understanding that Wilson

actually wrote both passages, that the two imagined statements were not real; these students generally chose a side and lambasted the opposing view. Those who recognized the unproductive nature of such debates struggled to explain how Wilson's satire works. Unable to separate Wilson from his imaginary voices, many students became outraged by his "angry" tone or berated him for adding fuel to an already flaming fire that had no immediate outlet.

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 other questions that ask students to analyze satire, this question revealed the continuing need for teachers to help students understand this complex form. Students must learn that satire takes forms other than the Swiftian "modest proposal." Teachers need to help students develop an ear for the subtle nuances of tone and voice, particularly when these appear in nonfiction writing. Students also need to learn how to detect and explain irony, which is an essential element of most satire but is used in other genres as well. In particular, students need to understand how a writer may use a satiric persona (explicitly or implicitly) to create distance between the views of that persona and the writer's own views.

- Many less-successful papers were decorated with elaborate terminology. Students often struggled to explain terms they barely understood. In his long poem *Hudibras,* seventeenth-century English poet Samuel Butler observed, "For all a rhetorician's rules teach nothing but to name his tools." Teachers need to do what they can to refute Butler's charge. Instead of learning to memorize and identify complex tropes, figures, and schemes, students should learn the common moves that writers use to develop a position. Students should acquire a limited vocabulary of familiar terms they actually understand, terms like *tone*, *metaphor*, *analogy*, *comparison*, *parallelism*, and *contrast*. Students need to learn that style is a part of rhetoric, not an end in itself. Writers use language not merely to ornament their writing but rather to shape the response of their readers.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question presented students with a quotation from Horace's *Satires* in which a dinner party guest, Balatro, observes, "Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant." Students were asked to consider the quotation and write an essay in which they defended, challenged, or qualified that assertion about the role of adversity in developing character. The prompt suggested some possible types of adversity—financial or political hardship, danger, misfortune. (This did not deter some students from writing about advertising.) Students were encouraged to provide support for their arguments with appropriate evidence from their reading, observation, or experience.

This task hearkened back to the classical essay, presenting the very type of theme that might have attracted Montaigne, Samuel Johnson, Charles Lamb, or William Hazlitt. The question provided considerable freedom, permitting students to use expository or narrative modes of discourse in creating an original argument. The question encouraged students to address how adversity affects the human condition, but more sophisticated responses also looked at redefining adversity or

establishing the conditions under which adversity impacts humankind. Fewer responses addressed the second half of Horace's comment, which implies that during times of prosperity, human beings may be less likely to develop their latent talents or character strengths.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.40 out of a possible 9 points. Given the open-ended nature of the question, most students could find something to say. Many found a personal voice in response to the prompt, something that recent argument tasks haven't always encouraged. For many students, adversity was often synonymous with competition or catastrophe, and they often drew evidence from personal experience or observation—success in sports, meeting the demands of parents and teachers, making and keeping friends. Some drew on emotional crises, and in some cases students revealed the dark worlds that they inhabit.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Less-successful essays frequently relied on detailed narration or description for support without discussing the causation implicit in Horace's quotation. These essays were often able to relate an example of adversity but weren't able to connect this experience to the development of character. Less-successful essays often belabored one example rather than providing a cascade of examples, as more adept student writers often did.

- Many students relied on the formula of the five-paragraph theme, which fit poorly with the demands of this prompt. The prompt allowed students the opportunity to truly "essay" a topic, often in a personal way, and formulaic approaches to organization frequently interferred with the freedom of a classical essay. True to the formulaic nature of such writing, some students dutifully devoted one paragraph to reading, one to observation, and one to experience.

- Literary examples haven't been a good fit with recent argument questions, but this was one topic where a well-chosen literary example could actually illustrate the point well. However, students often chose a familiar example whether it was appropriate or not, reaching for *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Great Gatsby*. Both of these novels could have worked, but students typically substituted plot summary for analysis and argumentation. Often they focused on the wrong details from these familiar works when other elements of the stories would have illustrated the issue much more effectively.

- Too many essays were "answers" rather than essays. It often appeared that students saw the word *adversity* and began to write reflexively, rather than taking the time to think and plan their response.

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 help students understand that mere assertion is not argument, no matter how frequently that assertion is repeated. In many cases, students simply recalled—often at great length—a tale of adversity and then trumpeted the triumph; the connection, the causality, the logic were often left unstated. Students need to be taught how to identify appropriate evidence and then how to use it to support their argument.

- Rather than providing students with formulas, teachers need to help students organize their essays conceptually, according to the demands of the argument. This particular topic focused essentially on causality: adversity is the cause, and the development of character is the effect. Whether using exposition or narration, students had to analyze a causal relationship to respond to this question successfully. Since the five-paragraph theme focuses primarily on exemplification (with a particular fondness for three examples), it was ill-suited to this particular task.

- Through extensive reading, discussion, and writing, students will come to recognize a world larger than their own immediate experience. Rather than considering the broader implications of Horace's quotation, many students focused on proximal causes because those were conveniently near. Teachers need to help students understand the usefulness of a global view, to increase their awareness of the world beyond their own. Students need to recognize that examples drawn from a wider world may be stronger. To advance this aim, teachers should be open to collaboration with their peers in other disciplines. In doing so, teachers will model the intellectual curiosity they hope to develop in their students. Many of the strongest essays this year drew on evidence from history, social science, biology, philosophy, and medicine. Teachers need to show students how their language skills can enhance their learning in other disciplines, just as the knowledge they gain in other courses can improve their essay-writing skills.

- Teachers need to teach students how argumentation works in a narrative mode—how stories, whether fictional or real, can be used to illustrate or clarify ideas. When relating their personal experiences, students need to be mindful of the public nature of most argumentation. In such a context, the primary purpose of a personal narrative is rhetorical, not confessional.

- When teachers teach literature in the AP English Language and Composition course, they need to teach students to read literature rhetorically. This means, in part, teaching students that literary texts are themselves rhetorical artifacts that are designed to shape the perceptions and responses of readers and that literature itself contains many examples of rhetorical artifacts: stories, speeches, essayistic passages, and dialogue and debate. Above all, teachers should help students understand the profound significance of Kenneth Burke's statement that literature is "equipment for living." Literature provides students with a rich source of ideas, examples, perceptions, and experiences that can be synthesized and powerfully transformed through their own writing. Teachers should help students understand that novels such as *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Great Gatsby* are not meant to be universal examples of all truths. Instead, reading such novels should provide students with occasions to reflect upon and examine the connections between their reading and the public questions facing the various communities they inhabit.