



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP[®] Spanish Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Literature were written by the Chief Reader, Hazel Gold of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. 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 "La higuera," a seven-stanza, 27-line poem by Juana de Ibarbourou. Students were asked to analyze the vision of the fig tree presented in the poem and to discuss the poet's use of language and poetic devices to communicate this vision.

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 accounts for the remaining 40 percent). Each question receives two separate scores. The first, for the content of the analysis, counts for 70 percent of an essay's score; the second, for language, counts for 30 percent.

The mean score for content for the Standard Group* of students was 4.79 out of 9 possible points. For the Total Group, the mean content score was 4.80. In 2008 the mean content scores for the Standard Group and the Total Group were significantly higher, 5.53 and 5.27, respectively. (The mean content scores achieved on the poetry analysis question last year were, in fact, among the highest since 2002.) The 2009 mean content scores for this question much more closely resemble the scores achieved in 2007 (4.79 for the Standard Group and 4.53 for the Total Group).

* 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 Total Group.

The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.40 out of 5 possible points, a slight increase from this group's mean score of 3.29 in 2008. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.70, once again representing an increase when compared to the mean score of 3.54 for the same group in 2008. For both the Standard Group and the Total Group, Question 1 yielded the highest mean score for language of the three free-response questions on this year's exam, exactly mirroring the results of the 2008 exam.

The poem selected for the poetry analysis question this year was of medium length. Its form and content—including vocabulary, poetic syntax, and imagery—were generally comprehensible to students. The structure of the poem is untraditional. Ibarbourou uses stanzas of three, four, and six verses of varying meter (*arte menor* and *arte mayor*, with a predominance of hexasyllables and decasyllables). The poem is quite rich in poetic language and devices, and these aspects presented a challenge to students attempting to discuss a variety of rhetorical figures in a well-organized essay.

The strongest essays perceived the compassion expressed by the poetic voice toward the homely *higuera* and noted the feminine solidarity that is established between Ibarbourou's poetic alter ego and the fig tree, a link that is reinforced grammatically by the feminine gender of *la higuera* and by the poet's ample use of personification. In weaker responses, students interpreted *visión* in a literal sense and spoke only about the physical appearance of the tree, not the more abstract or philosophical idea of vision as perspective or attitude. The vision of the fig tree, which is linked to how it is perceived by the poetic voice, proved accessible to students with differing levels of analytical ability.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Paraphrasing or describing the poem in lieu of analyzing it
- Discussing concepts that are mentioned in the poem (beauty, solitude, nature, etc.) without focusing on the question and/or the poem itself
- Listing poetic devices present in the poem and even defining those devices without integrating them into an analysis of how they communicate the vision of the fig tree
- Failing to include specific textual references
- Failing to mention form as related 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, and it always features a poem that does not come from the required reading list. The advantage for students is having the text in front of them while they consider, plan, and write their response. Reading new poems and practicing ways to respond to the same type of prompt under the same conditions and constraints as those of the AP Exam will help students to refine their skills and become better equipped to write a well-developed and organized treatment of the question.

Teachers can further help by encouraging students to set aside time to read the question carefully and then to read the poem thoroughly, keeping the question in mind. Teachers can suggest that students underline or circle the important parts of the question—in this case, the vision of the fig tree, how the poetic devices and language communicate this theme, and the need for specific supporting examples from the poem itself. This type of exercise trains students to remember to fully address the question. Teaching them to take a few minutes to outline their responses and to reserve some time for proofreading, editing, and/or correcting elements of their work is another valuable practice.

Throughout the AP Spanish Literature course, teachers can help their students by:

- Involving the class in small-group work or, in a prewriting phase, having students share their thoughts concerning a poem’s theme, form, and the poetic language and devices employed.
- Working regularly with students on literary vocabulary, 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.
- Making peer review among students 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 is an analysis of a given theme or topic in one work from the required reading list, and the second involves the comparison of a given theme or topic in two works from the list. This year’s question was of the former type. Students were asked to write an essay analyzing how a specific event produces a transformation in one or more persons in one work chosen from a list of four titles: Cervantes’s *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*, Alas’s “¡Adiós, Cordera!,” García Márquez’s “El ahogado más hermoso del mundo,” and Cortázar’s “La noche boca arriba.” These works offered significant coverage of the reading list geographically (Spain and Latin America) and chronologically (seventeenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries). All the options were narrative texts, so they especially lent themselves to a question that asked about a relationship between cause and effect, event and ensuing transformation.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean content score for the Standard Group was 4.84 out of 9 possible points, about one-third of a point higher than the mean score of 4.49 earned by this group on the 2008 exam. The mean content score for the Total Group was 4.66, more than half a point higher than the 2008 mean score of 4.04 for this group.

The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.10 out of 5 possible points, slightly higher than this group’s mean score of 3.00 on the 2008 exam. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.40, noticeably higher than this group’s 2008 mean score of 3.03.

Clearly, the four works listed in the question were familiar to most students and offered a good selection from which to choose. There was considerable variation in the way students responded to the question; some chose to write about a single event in the selected work, while others discussed a linked sequence of events as a single process. Commentary also varied depending on whether students viewed the event as internal or external. Finally, some essays discussed the transformation of a single character, whereas others—especially those that dealt with the García Márquez story—discussed the collective transformation of an entire town or society. All of these were considered acceptable approaches, provided that the responses incorporated the analysis required by the question.

Of the four works, students clearly had the greatest difficulty analyzing the required theme in “La noche boca arriba,” most likely because the transformation of the protagonist in this story—rather than being physical, emotional, or social—is related to his vacillation between parallel worlds and his (and the readers’) ultimate realization of which is merely a dream or hallucination and which is reality. Students appeared to favor using the Don Quijote selection and “¡Adiós, Cordera!” to answer this question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Inability to deal with the theme of transformation produced by a specific event in the chosen text
- Superficial development of the theme
- Excessive plot summary and minimal analysis
- Insufficient supporting examples from the chosen text
- General or vague responses that suggested students were not familiar with the work
- Superfluous and/or erroneous 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, how a specific event produces a transformation in one or more persons in the text selected, with supporting textual references. The best essays contain specific examples to support the students’ ideas, and the ideas are presented in a systematic, explicit, and logical manner. When answering this question, it is imperative that students clearly state which text(s) they are treating and that they limit their response to those works, as stipulated by the instructions for the question.

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

- Giving students in-class writing practice with all aspects of essay composition: prewriting, outlining, writing, editing, and proofreading.
- Asking students to act as editors of their *own* essays, an exercise that can help them recognize problems in their work and refine their essay-writing skills.
- Helping students learn to stay focused on the topic by routinely pointing out content in their essays that is superfluous or irrelevant to the subject.
- Teaching students to distinguish analysis from mere paraphrasing or plot summary.
- Teaching students how to develop and properly support their ideas in the analysis at hand.

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. This year's question was of the former type. It was based on an excerpt from "Las sociedades creadas en el teatro de Federico García Lorca," an article by Dennis A. Klein in which he discusses the symbolic use of walls to express the enforcement or transgression of social, sexual, and gender norms by the characters in *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. Students were asked to analyze how the ideas in the excerpt from Klein's commentary are reflected in the play.

How well did students perform on this question?

Last year, Question 3 had two parts for students to answer, so the highest possible score for content was 10 points (representing 5 possible points for each of the two parts of the question). On this year's exam, Question 3 was an analysis of a critical commentary about *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, and the highest possible score was 9 points.

For the Standard Group, the mean content score was 5.01 out of 9 possible points. This was the highest mean content score earned by this group on the free-response section of this year's exam. The mean content score for the Total Group was 4.74.

The mean language score for the Standard Group this year was 3.13 out of 5 possible points, very close to the 2008 mean score of 3.20 for this group. For the Total Group, the mean language score was 3.43, somewhat higher than the mean score of 3.27 for this group in 2008.

La casa de Bernarda Alba, a three-act play, was the lengthiest work referenced in a question in this year's exam. As one of only three dramatic works on the required reading list, it occupies an important place in the curriculum and presumably receives considerable emphasis in the classroom. Students' familiarity with this play, as well as the very accessible language of the quotation from the article, may explain why many students achieved high scores on this question. Students who had not read the play or had not read it in its entirety were unable to address the question competently. Others tended to paraphrase and/or summarize the content of the quotation in lieu of providing textual analysis. In the latter case, student essays devolved into an enumeration

of the dichotomies mentioned in the quotation (repression/freedom, decency/immorality, women/men, sexual frustration/free expression of sexuality), without sustained development. Some of the most insightful responses took issue with the interpretation of the play that is found in the quotation and instead offered an alternative reading of Lorca's drama, citing concrete examples to support their argument.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Paraphrasing the quotation instead of analyzing how the ideas it presents are reflected in the play
- Analyzing only one of the ideas in the quotation
- Demonstrating inadequate understanding of the quotation
- Providing insufficient supporting examples from the play
- Offering general or vague responses that suggested an unfamiliarity with the play
- Making superfluous and/or erroneous statements
- Showing 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?

In addition to the suggestions already given to help students better prepare for and perform well on the poetry analysis and thematic analysis questions, further recommendations for the text analysis question include:

- Find critical commentaries for a number of texts on the required reading list in order to give students practice with this type of textual analysis question. At different points during the year, have students answer this kind of question under conditions and constraints similar to those of the AP Spanish Literature Exam.
- Encourage students to highlight or circle important words or concepts in the critical commentary.
- Teach students how to write effective thesis statements and conclusions.
- Work with students on developing and practicing a list of vocabulary words, 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, for example, writing anecdotal commentaries.

Because the text analysis question can be based on any work on the required reading list, it is important that students read each work completely. Teachers can further assist students by guiding them through a close reading of all the works, including a consideration of vocabulary as well as linguistic and stylistic features, regardless of the genre. Such preparation will help students when answering all three free-response questions on the AP Spanish Literature Exam.