



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Raymond “Skip” Hyser of James Madison University in Harrisonburg, 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

What was the intent of this question?

The document-based question asked students to explain the rise in the number of free African Americans during a time in which the institution of slavery was also expanding. Additionally, students had to analyze the ways in which both free and enslaved African Americans responded to the challenges they faced between 1775 and 1830.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.22 out of a possible 9 points. Students performed reasonably well on this question. Generally, they used a wide range of documents and interpreted them well. Students made significant links between Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation and Paul Cuffe’s Petition and between the comments of Prince Hall and Hosea Easton and the Paul Cuffe document. There was some misinterpretation of David Walker’s Appeal. Students brought in a limited amount of outside information.

It was not uncommon for one of the four components of the question to be embedded in a discussion of or implicitly addressed in one of the other components. Students also had some trouble constructing thesis statements that addressed all four components. The documents tended to lead students toward longer explanations of how free African Americans and slaves responded to the challenges facing them and shorter explanations of the expansion of both groups. The better essays showed a good understanding of chronological sequencing and cause-and-effect relationships.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Frequently, essays quoted the documents extensively, and in some cases the documents seemed to drive the organization of the essay. Some students failed to address all four components of the question. Discussion of the expansion of slavery and the increase in the number of free African Americans was often underdeveloped. Some students misinterpreted David Walker’s reference to Jefferson, and some students mistakenly saw Lord Dunmore as a patriot. Reference to outside information was more limited than usual for a document-based question. There were also problems with chronological sequencing.

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?

Students should be encouraged to synthesize the information that is in the documents rather than paraphrasing or quoting the documents. Instead of telling what is in a document, students should use the main idea of the document to support their thesis. Continued emphasis needs to be placed on using the documents as cues to trigger outside information. Students should also be trained to examine all aspects of a question and to explicitly address each component in it. Attention to chronological sequencing is necessary as well.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze the ways in which British imperial policies between 1763 and 1776 intensified colonials’ resistance to British rule and their commitment to republican values.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.74 out of a possible 9 points. This question elicited the strongest student response for the compare-and-contrast question in recent years. Most students had some knowledge of the period, which allowed most of them to do reasonably well, especially on the sections concerning imperial policies and colonial resistance. The traditional nature of the question (i.e., a well-structured prompt) encouraged students to incorporate analysis of republican values with their recall of policies and resistance and enabled many to perform well and showcase what they knew.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students failed to include an analysis of republican values, and many made frequent chronological errors, especially placing the Boston Massacre *after* the Boston Tea Party.

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 train students to do prewriting organizational exercises (e.g., diagramming, outlining, concept mapping) to help them answer all parts of the question and structure a well-organized response. Not all questions call for a social/economic/political paragraph structure. Additionally, students should review a timeline before the exam. Teachers should emphasize historical critical thinking skills (e.g., developing a thesis, argumentation) and developing the ability to marshal evidence to support an argument.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This straightforward, multicausation question is anchored in significant decades of United States history. It tested students' understanding of interlocking social, political, and economic forces during the 1840s and early 1850s. Students were expected to analyze the fracturing of the political party system in the antebellum era and the subsequent development of a new political party, the Republicans.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.64 out of a possible 9 points. Students who chose this question provided disappointing essays that generally lacked analysis and understanding of the question; students typically failed to see the context of expansionism and slavery as these related to political party development. There were, however, a number of top-category essays that demonstrated impressive analysis, included substantial and relevant historic information, and showed insightful recognition of change over time. These outstanding essays effectively interwove the three forces and linked them specifically to the emergence of the Republican Party; they were nuanced and explored the complexity of the issues.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students used a paraphrase of the question as their thesis statement and gave little indication that they understood the role that political, economic, and social forces played in the emergence of the Republican Party. Responses were frequently generalized and simplistic to the extent that Exam Readers could not distinguish whether students were describing Federalists, Jeffersonian Republicans, or Jacksonian Democrats.

Many students wrote about sectionalism and not the rise of the Republican Party. Many confused the agenda of the Gilded Age or today's Republican Party with the political agenda of the emerging party. A number of essays were outside the time period, noting, for example, Theodore Roosevelt, the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan. Those essays that were anchored within the question's stated chronology tended to ignore or skim over the 1840s. Often students thought only abolitionists founded the Republican Party, and they definitely explained political forces more thoroughly than economic and social forces. Students frequently blended or confused social forces with economic and political events. They rarely included the breakdown of the Second Party system.

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 question required students to synthesize information found in several different textbook chapters; consequently, teachers need to emphasize themes, such as slavery and sectionalism, over broad time periods. Using and/or constructing charts with decades and categories like “social,” “political,” and “economic” will help students develop a broader perspective and think conceptually. Teachers should include the evolution of political parties and the fluidity of a party’s agenda in their instruction. Students need consistent instruction and writing practice in a variety of formats, including chronology, cause and effect, and change over time. They should also be given practice with using an acronym like APPARTS or SPRITE. Students must first consider the intent and focus of a question, prepare an outline that notes the component parts of the question, and then write analytically. Description and factual knowledge are important, but the most effective essays explain and analyze.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to explain the strategies of two labor organizations and to evaluate the success of the organizations in achieving their objectives during the period from 1875 to 1925. The question required students to develop a compound thesis and, implicitly, to recognize change over time.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.95 out of a possible 9 points. Although many essays contained little more than generic statements about working conditions and the objectives of labor organizations during the time period stipulated in the question, some students offered slightly more specific information and analysis related to the organizations, particularly the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). One Table Leader at the Reading observed, “Many students had a general knowledge that included some broad analysis (especially on the Knights of Labor and AFL). A reasonably impressive number of students had a deeper knowledge of the social and political processes of both unions and government and were able to write more analytical essays.” Some essays linked the organizations’ strategies and objectives to larger economic and social issues and reforms of the period. Better essays tended to recognize change in the organizations over time, even though the question did not explicitly require it. In addition, many essays used a comparative framework to organize their response.

The question had two parts (explaining strategies and evaluating success) and implicitly a third part (identifying objectives), but students did not always present a thesis that addressed both parts of the question. Instead, their thesis was fragmented throughout the essay; some students wrote part of a thesis in the essay’s introduction that answered the first part of the question and then, later in the essay, stated the second part of the thesis as they turned to an analysis of the second part of the question. Some essays stated the thesis in the concluding paragraph.

Most essays focused on the Knights of Labor and the AFL. The Socialist Party of America (SPA) and the International Workers of the World (IWW) were chosen less often, with the IWW being chosen the least. Some essays were uneven in their treatment of the two parts of the question for each of the organizations (i.e., these essays explained strategies better than they analyzed successes for one organization, while doing the opposite for the other). Other essays were uneven in their consideration of the two organizations, treating one organization more thoroughly than the other. Given the differences in the four organizations' goals and histories, better essays usually separated them when evaluating the achievement of the organizations' objectives.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students confused the composition, strategies, leaders, and objectives of the Knights of Labor and the AFL. They also confused the SPA and the IWW and/or confused socialism and the SPA. Their knowledge of both the SPA and the IWW tended to be weaker than their knowledge of the Knights of Labor and the AFL. Some essays included accurate information that related generally to working conditions and labor in the period but did not necessarily relate to the question being asked. For example, these essays associated the railroad strikes of 1877 and the Pullman strike with the Knights of Labor or the AFL.

Students did not discuss the entire period of 1875–1925, particularly when analyzing the success of the AFL; they tended to concentrate on just the late nineteenth century. Students often attributed business and labor reforms, and Progressive legislation in general, to the efforts of the four organizations, even when the connection was either nonexistent or tenuous at best. Some students expressed a belief that Populism and the Populist Party provided the basis of the four organizations. Essays included information out of the time period, particularly New Deal labor reforms (e.g., the Wagner Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act). Essays described working conditions and the problems facing workers rather than explaining the organizations' strategies and analyzing the success of those strategies.

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 question lent itself to the process of using historical information in an analytical way, a skill that teachers should encourage their students to develop. Always emphasize analysis rather than the recitation of factual information. Teachers can reinforce analytical and writing skills through explicit instruction in how to write essays that answer historical questions and require analysis. Teachers should also prompt students to recognize and analyze change over time and historical cause and effect.

To answer this question, students needed to have knowledge of labor organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a rather substantial period of time. Teachers should emphasize themes that span a larger time period than the period on which the typical textbook chapter is based. This question required students to synthesize and analyze information commonly found in several different textbook chapters and units of study.

Students benefit when teachers stress the importance of writing a clear thesis that explicitly answers the question. If a question has more than one component, the thesis should address each component. Encourage students to dissect a question and recognize the various tasks it is asking them to perform. Then, teach students to organize their essay through the use of an outline that addresses all the components of the question before they begin writing their essay.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze the home-front experiences of two ethnic/racial groups (African Americans, Japanese Americans, Jewish Americans, or Mexican Americans) during the Second World War. Students were expected to explore the national and regional grassroots experiences of Americans, to comment on the issues of civil liberties versus national security, and to analyze war as a catalyst for social change and social transformation.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.03 out of a possible 9 points. Students did not perform well on this question, with most earning scores in the 2–4 range. Most responses included a thesis statement of sorts that related to the question, and many responses were more descriptive than analytical. A number of students did not seem to understand what the word “analyze” was asking them to do, since often the responses were a comparison/contrast between the two chosen groups.

There was an imbalance in the treatment of the two chosen groups, frequently with a stronger treatment of one group than the other (the scoring guidelines allowed this). Too many essays had superficial coverage and minimal analysis of the home-front experiences of the two groups, and frequently they offered very little substantial, specific information on one group, let alone both groups. Vague generalizations dominated many essays.

Many students noted that Japanese internment camps existed. While overgeneralizing and sometimes comparing these to Nazi concentration camps, students took a stand and identified this as a low point in the history of the United States, recognizing that Japanese American internment was an important but bad episode in U.S. history. Some students knew about the Supreme Court decision regarding internment, and some even knew its name (*Korematsu v. United States*).

Many students cited the war as presenting benefits and opportunities for African Americans (e.g., factory jobs, the Great Migration from South to North, and serving in the military, albeit in segregated units), while acknowledging the racism and discrimination African Americans experienced at home (e.g., going overseas to fight for rights they did not have at home). Some students saw this as a springboard to the Civil Rights movement to come. Some students cited the Double V campaign (victory at home and abroad).

The fewest number of responses dealt with Mexican Americans and Jewish Americans. Some of the students who chose Mexican Americans were aware of the *Bracero* program and correctly used the Zoot Suit Riots. Many did not.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often made generalizations and offered vague information as support for their thesis; too many essays provided little specific information. Most responses were weak on chronology, with students conflating time periods/information or presenting much of their information from outside the time period (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights movement, Rosa Parks). Better essays made a connection between the information from outside of the time period and the group on the Second World War home front. Many essays focused on the military aspects of the war overseas, not on the home front. In some instances the Japanese, Hitler, and the Nazis were presented as “Communists.”

Some of the students who chose Jewish Americans wrote extensively about the Holocaust. They seemed to confuse the Holocaust with the home-front experiences of Jewish Americans. Overall, the least amount of information was presented in responses dealing with Jewish Americans on the home front.

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 instruct students on how to read and understand a question before answering it. They should also encourage the practice of outlining an essay before writing it and ensuring the essay addresses all parts of the question. Students should learn how to support such a thesis with substantial and specific information. They should also know what *analyze* means. A better link of social/cultural issues to historical events is needed, and teachers could place more emphasis on social/cultural history and issues that affect people on the home front during times of war. There should be continued emphasis on chronology, even within a thematic approach.