



## **Student Performance Q&A:**

### **2010 AP® English Language and Composition**

### **Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2010 free-response questions for AP® English Language and Composition were written by the Chief Reader, David Jolliffe of the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, assisted by three Question Leaders: Stephen Heller of Adlai Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Ill.; Eva Arce of James Bowie High School, Austin, Texas; and Van Hartmann of Manhattanville College, Purchase, N.Y. 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 examined students' ability to develop their own position on a given topic, referring to and incorporating sources as they did so. The synthesis question, moreover, called for students to demonstrate the ability to summarize, paraphrase and quote properly from sources and to cite them accurately. The question asked students to consider six sources — five texts and one cartoon — about the “ubiquitous presence of information technologies” in their culture. The prompt directed students to write an essay, synthesizing at least three of the sources for support, in which they were to “evaluate the most important factors that a school should consider before using particular technologies in curriculum and instruction.”

##### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 4.63 out of a possible 9 points. Given the indisputable presence of information technology in their lives, students generally found the topic quite accessible. Their responses revealed the tremendous impact technology is already having on their education. While many extolled the benefits of technology for teaching and learning, a substantial proportion criticized its omnipresence, citing the effect technology in schools has on human interaction, experiential education, and thoughtful immersion in the world of imaginative writing. The most successful responses seemed attuned to the importance of public conversations about issues involving education: one excellent essay argued that “schools are sometimes too quick to incorporate new technologies into their classrooms in the name of progress,” while another noted that a school’s primary goal must be “to educate people and develop optimal learning environments.” At the core of successful responses was the use of sources to support the student’s own insights. Students who could consider sources and use them as a springboard to develop their own original position demonstrated clearly many features of effective writing.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

The most common errors resulted from students' failure to consider carefully two important words in the prompt: "**evaluate** the most important factors that a school should consider before using **particular** technologies in curriculum and instruction." Rather than defining and evaluating factors that schools should consider, ineffective responses generally just described the widespread presence of information technologies in students' lives, either within the boundaries of school or beyond them. Similarly, ineffective responses often talked about these technologies in very general, rather than particular and specific, terms. The result of both of these faulty strategies was usually an essay that argued either in favor of or against the impact of technology, rather than one that evaluated the factors a school should consider before incorporating technology in curriculum and instruction.

Other common errors resembled those that have been present since the introduction of the synthesis question on the 2007 AP Exam. The following simply recasts three points made in last year's "Student Performance Q&A":

- Instead of using the sources to develop a position on the most important factors a school should consider before incorporating technology in its curriculum and instruction, many students merely repeated information from the sources, often just responding personally to the sources without trying to incorporate them into their own position. In addition, some students divided the sources into "pro" and "con" categories, again failing to connect this move to the development of their own position.
- Instead of using the sources to support a position, many students allowed a summary or paraphrase of the sources to drive the development of the response. Indeed, some essays attempted to shoehorn the summary/paraphrase process into a five-paragraph theme: formulaic introduction, one paragraph about each of the sources, formulaic conclusion.
- Instead of showing the connection of a source to the position being developed, some students simply asserted their position or presented a quotation from a source as a self-evident proof, without providing further explanation or connection.

### ***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?***

- Be sure students understand that the most frequent type of writing they will do in college is source-based writing. Students will regularly be called on to develop a position — be it informational, explanatory or argumentative — and to support that position not solely by summarizing or paraphrasing sources but by entering into conversation with the sources and incorporating them in the development of the position. (For a good overview of source-based writing in college, see Mary Kay Mulvaney, "Analytic Writing in College: Forms, Sites, and Strategies," in David A. Jolliffe, ed., *AP English Language: Reading and Writing Analytically* [New York: The College Board, 2008]: 19–42.)
- Help students understand the various ways writers engage with their sources to develop a position. An inexperienced writer's typical move is to find sources that agree with his or her position; however, an effective writer generally moves beyond the "agree with" or "disagree with" relationship with sources. Students need practice with using sources to extend or counter an idea or make connections among ideas.
- Teach students how to introduce quoted, summarized or paraphrased material from sources and how to incorporate quoted or paraphrased material in their own syntax. The simple dropping in of quoted material, whether a brief passage or a long quotation, is jarring, ineffective writing.

- Continue emphasizing to students that any material they synthesize in their own positions, whether they quote it, summarize it or paraphrase it, must be cited. To prepare for the AP English Language and Composition Exam, students can practice the simplified citation method recommended by the prompt, but they should also become familiar with the more widely accepted citation styles — for example, MLA and APA — that they will need to use in college papers.
- Continue to show students how to analyze rhetorically the positions and points made by nontextual sources (such as charts, graphs, pictures and cartoons), so that students are able to synthesize such material into their own compositions.

## Question 2

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This question examined students' ability to engage in close reading and rhetorical analysis of a piece of nonfiction prose — that is, their ability to explain the meaning, purpose and effect of a passage and the rhetorical strategies the author employed to convey meaning, achieve purpose and create an effect. In particular, students were asked to read and analyze an excerpt of a letter written to Thomas Jefferson in 1791 by Benjamin Banneker, the son of former slaves and a successful farmer, astronomer, mathematician, surveyor and author. Students were directed to “write an essay that analyzes how Banneker uses rhetorical strategies to argue against slavery.”

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 4.18 out of a possible 9 points. Successful responses to the prompt generally focused initially on explaining the central argument/main point and purpose of the excerpt, rather than jumping directly into an identification and explanation of the strategies Banneker used. In addition to demonstrating clear understanding of the main point and rhetorical purpose, successful responses noted how Banneker's deferential stance toward Jefferson (his primary audience) and his reserved, yet passionate, tone toward his subject matter (the potential abolition of slavery) both established his credibility and appealed to what Banneker hoped was Jefferson's belief in human rights and dignity. Successful essays, then, found evidence in the text to support their claims about the main point, the tone, the stance and the appeals to the author's credibility and to Jefferson's belief system. In other words, successful essays realized that every analysis is an argument in which the student makes claims about the meaning, purpose, effect, tone, stance and appeals of a passage and then supports those claims with evidence drawn from the text.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

There were two sources of error. One was the inability of some students to comprehend the meaning of the passage, which is written in what might be termed “archaic” prose — prose written prior to 1900. For example, noting Banneker's allusion to Job in the final paragraph of the passage, one student asserted that Banneker had made “a light-hearted reference to the Bible,” even though the prompt contained a footnote identifying Job as “a righteous man who endures much suffering.” The other source of error was the frequently seen propensity simply to identify literary and rhetorical strategies in the text without explaining how they function to establish meaning, purpose, effect, stance, tone and appeals. A typical paper from the lower half of the scoring range would often set out three terms to identify in its thesis statement — for example, “hyperbole, synecdoche and anaphora,” “imagery, syntax and diction,” or “ethos, pathos and logos” — and then offer a five-paragraph theme, with one paragraph about each element, without connecting them to Banneker's central idea and purpose.

**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?**

- Develop a stronger understanding of rhetorical analysis and close reading and consciously teach those practices to students. In terms of rhetorical analysis, teachers should be sure students understand the basic components of any rhetorical transaction: speaker/writer, audience/reader, rhetorical purpose, stance, tone and appeals. Teachers need to understand, and teach, that logos, ethos and pathos are not separate, independent entities that can be dropped into a text at will. Logos is the central appeal; the ways a text appeals to ethos and pathos must grow out of its appeal to logos. Moreover, a text does not *have* logos, ethos and pathos; a text or its author *appeals* to logos, ethos and pathos. Finally, teachers need to teach close reading, showing students how the arrangement or organization of a text, along with its diction, syntax, imagery and allusions, and figurative language embody and support the accomplishment of meaning, purpose, effect, stance, tone and appeals.
- Devote some time to helping students “translate” and comprehend prose written prior to 1900. No matter what areas, majors or fields students study in college, they will be exposed, either in general education courses or in their majors, to documents written before the 20th century. Understanding these texts requires patient practice and careful instruction.

### **Question 3**

#### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This question examined students’ ability to write an effective, compelling argument based on a prompt, drawing on evidence from their own experiences, observations and reading to support their central claim or thesis. In particular, students were presented with the assertion, made by Alain de Botton in his 2004 book, *Status Anxiety*, that the chief aim of humorists is not merely to entertain but “to convey with impunity messages that might be dangerous or impossible to state directly” and the claim, offered in the prompt, that “de Botton sees humorists as serving a vital function in society.” Students were directed to “write an essay that defends, challenges, or qualifies de Botton’s claims about the vital role of humorists.”

#### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 4.38 out of a possible 9 points. Successful writers did four things: read de Botton’s argument correctly and understood its import; constructed a coherent, convincing argument in response to de Botton; marshaled and developed appropriate evidence in defense of their own argument; and conveyed their ideas in clear, effective prose. The strongest essays understood the full dimension of de Botton’s argument, including his emphasis on the potential dangers of giving voice to unpopular opinions and unpleasant truths, the unique impunity that humor can confer, and the nature of the vital role de Botton claims that this truth seeking plays in a society. While many of the stronger essays agreed with de Botton’s argument, some qualified it and others challenged it accurately and forcefully, maintaining that one must sometimes step out from behind the protective mask of humor to confront corruption and injustice directly.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Three types of errors were common. First, weaker essays sometimes misunderstood or oversimplified the prompt and proceeded to agree with what they perceived as de Botton's argument that, to quote one, "we should all just lighten up and relax." Second, some of the weakest essays consisted of random, disorganized assertions without any sense of central claim or commitment to a reader. These responses often seemed more like "exam answers" than actual essays in which the writer thinks through a complex idea in the imagined presence of an interested, engaged reader. Third, many of the weakest essays offered very few, and often no, examples to support their often-blatant assertions.

***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?***

- Emphasize the difference between writing an exam answer and an essay. The latter genre contextualizes the issue at hand for an audience, provides background information that readers need to draw upon, narrows its focus to a central claim or commitment, develops that claim with evidence and reasoning, anticipates counterarguments and answers them, and ends by addressing the implications of the essay for the culture of readers who might encounter it.
- Help students learn multiple ways to define and develop a variety of evidence. Some of the best essays established a sophisticated cultural and historical perspective on the issue; others mined contemporary culture for examples and evidence; still others astutely used personal experience as a source of evidence. Too often AP English Language and Composition students think they are duty bound to find evidence in texts from American and British literature that they have read, even when the material in those texts has relatively little to do with the issue at hand.
- Devote considerable energy to helping students develop rich syntactic structures and an appropriately full and effective vocabulary. At the 2010 AP Reading, the weakest writers' problems with sentence fragments, distracting grammatical and syntactical errors, and at times simple verbal incoherence raised concerns about the state of the language in our culture. In essays from the middle scoring range, competent and adequate prose served a pedestrian function. Among the best essays, the full, engaging sentences and the lucid clarity of expression restored our faith that the written word is alive and quite healthy in a segment of high school students.