



Student Performance Q&A: 2010 AP® Spanish Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2010 free-response questions for AP® Spanish Literature were written by the Chief Reader, Hazel Gold of Emory University in Atlanta. 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?

This question assessed 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 "El sediento," a three-stanza, 18-line poem by Octavio Paz. Students were asked to analyze the theme of the search that is presented in the poem and to discuss the poet's use of poetic language and devices to communicate this theme.

How well did students perform on this question?

Each of the three free-response 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 the essay's score; the second, for language, counts for 30 percent.

The mean score for content for the Standard Group* of students on Question 1 was 4.82 out of 9 possible points. For the Total Group, the mean score for content was 4.60. These results are quite comparable to those of 2009, when the mean content scores for the Standard Group and the Total Group were 4.79 and 4.80, respectively.

The mean score for language for the Standard Group was 3.56 out of 5 possible points, a slight increase from this group's mean score of 3.40 in 2009. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.77, nearly identical to the mean language score of 3.70 for the same group on the 2009 exam.

* 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. However, decisions on cutoff scores are based on the Total Group.

The work selected for this year’s poetry analysis question was of medium length. The structure of the poem is nontraditional; its three stanzas are comprised of verses of *arte menor* of varying lengths and assonant rhyme, along with an unusual reliance on *versos agudos*. The poem’s form and content, including vocabulary, poetic syntax and imagery, were generally comprehensible to students, and the theme of the search proved accessible to students with differing levels of analytical ability. The poem is quite rich in poetic language and devices, aspects that presented a challenge to students attempting to discuss a variety of rhetorical figures in a well-organized essay. Along with the recurrent use of *encabalgamiento*, *anáfora*, *apóstrofe*, repetition, parallelism and paradox, the poem centers on a cluster of images (“estrella de agua,” “se anegó,” “naufraqué,” “espesura de reflejos,” “anegado,” “aguas de espejo,” “beber,” “sed”) that conceptually represent the search for the poetic voice (most frequently explained by students as the search for identity through the vehicle of poetry itself) as a source of perennial dissatisfaction, metaphorically compared to an unquenched thirst.

The strongest essays perceived the pursuit of the poetic voice as unending and showed how the circularity of the poem, beginning with the title (“El sediento”) and ending with the word “sed,” reinforced this idea of an interminable journey in search of self. Weaker responses encountered difficulty in interpreting the more abstract elements of this metapoem; students were able to identify vocabulary and poetic figures related to water imagery but failed to connect them to the title, which announces the anguished and contradictory nature of the search that is developed in the rest of the poem. The least successful responses demonstrated an inadequate understanding of the poem and an inability to integrate the discussion (if any) of poetic language and devices into an analysis of the poem’s theme.

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 (nature, water, poetry) without focusing on the question or the poem itself
- Listing poetic devices in the poem and even defining these devices without integrating them into an analysis of how they communicate the theme of the search
- Failing to include specific textual references
- Failing to mention form as related to the poem’s content
- 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?

A poetry question appears on the exam every year; 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 exam will help students refine their skills. In addition, students will be better equipped to write a well-developed and organized treatment of the question.

Teachers can 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 might suggest that students underline or circle the important parts of the question — in this case, the theme of the search, how the poetic devices and language communicate this theme, and the need for specific

supporting examples from the poem itself. This type of exercise will help students remember to fully address the question. Teaching students to take a few minutes to outline their responses and to reserve some time for editing and proofreading their work is a valuable practice.

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

- Involving the class in small-group work or, in a prewriting phase, having students collectively share their thoughts concerning a poem's theme, its form, and the poetic language and devices employed;
- Routinely working with students so that they better understand the literary vocabulary, such as the various rhetorical devices or figures of speech and rhyme 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; and
- Using peer review as part of the editing process.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

In the thematic analysis, two types of questions are possible: one type is an analysis of a given theme or topic in one work from the reading list; the second type involves the comparison of a given theme or topic in two works from the required reading list. This year's question was of the latter type. Students were asked to write an essay analyzing the encounter of two cultures in two works chosen from a list of four titles: Nicolás Guillén's "Balada de los dos abuelos," Carlos Fuentes's "Chac Mool," Jorge Luis Borges's "El sur," and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*. Chronologically, these works offered coverage of the early colonial and modern periods represented on the reading list; they also provided a diverse selection of Latin American texts, including examples of the national literatures of Cuba, Mexico and Argentina. Finally, the options included a wide range of genres: short stories (Fuentes, Borges), poetry (Guillén), and historical chronicle (Cabeza de Vaca). The scope of the question was also broadened by virtue of the many diverse cultural encounters that are staged in these four texts: between indigenous peoples and Europeans (*Naufragios*), pre-Columbian and contemporary cultures ("Chac Mool"), blacks and whites ("Balada"), and Europeans and *criollos*, here represented by the Argentine gauchos ("El sur").

How well did students perform on this question?

For the Standard Group the mean content score was 4.74 out of 9 possible points, slightly lower than the mean score of 4.84 that this group earned on the 2009 exam. The mean content score for the Total Group was 4.18, nearly a half-point decrease from the score of 4.66 earned by this group in 2009.

The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.49 out of 5 possible points, somewhat higher than this group's mean score of 3.10 on the 2009 exam. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.50, again slightly higher than this group's mean score for the previous year (3.40). For both groups Question 2 yielded the lowest mean score for language of the three free-response questions on this year's exam. This was also the case for the 2009 exam.

The four works were familiar to most students and offered a good selection from which to choose. Students favored using “Chac Mool” and “El sur” to answer this question, although many other pairings of works were observed in their essays (for instance, “Balada” and *Naufragios*; “Balada” and “El sur”; “Chac Mool” and *Naufragios*). As a result, there was considerable variation in responses. The best essays were structured around concepts as opposed to the works themselves. That is to say, they focused on the thematic analysis required by the question. Thus the most capable students expressly compared the conditions and outcomes of the encounters portrayed in the selected texts; they were able to analyze the differences (national, racial, historical, etc.) set into play by the contact between cultures, the nature of this contact (violent or nonviolent), and the impact of the encounters upon the identities of the individuals in the chosen works. Some students wrestled with the concept of cultural encounter and thus had difficulty answering the question; others understood the theme but did not fully understand the question, producing essays that summarized both works but offered no analytical comparison. Insufficient knowledge of the historical context proved problematic for some students who attempted to discuss *Naufragios*.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Inability to deal with the theme of the encounter of two cultures in the chosen works
- Superficial development of the theme
- Analyzing the works individually, without drawing an explicit comparison
- Excessive plot summary and minimal analysis
- Insufficient supporting examples from the chosen works
- General or vague responses that suggested students were not familiar with the works
- Superfluous 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 and continues with the writing of a response that fully treats the topic — here, the encounter of two cultures in the works selected — with supporting textual references. The best essays contain specific examples to support students’ ideas, and those ideas are presented in a systematic, explicit and logical manner. It is imperative that students clearly state which texts they are discussing and that they limit their response to those works, as stipulated in the instructions for the question. In a question like this one, in which students are asked to compare the development of a theme in two works, their essays must make this comparison explicit.

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

- Giving students practice with all aspects of essay composition: prewriting, outlining, writing, editing and proofreading;
- In addition to requiring peer editing, having students edit their *own* essays, an exercise that can help them recognize problems and refine their essay-writing skills;

- Helping students stay focused on the topic by routinely pointing out instances in which the content of their essays is superfluous or irrelevant to the subject;
- Teaching students to distinguish analysis from mere paraphrasing or plot summary;
- Instructing students on how to structure an essay that draws an explicit comparison, based on discussion of two works; and
- Teaching students how to develop and properly support their ideas in the analysis at hand.

Question 3

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 with two separate questions to answer. This year's question was of the latter type. The exam included a passage taken from Miguel de Unamuno's novel *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*. In part (a) students were asked to analyze the ideas about religion expressed by don Manuel in the cited passage. In part (b), basing the answer on the cited passage and the rest of the novel, students were then asked to explain the influence exerted by don Manuel on the narrator, Angelina.

How well did students perform on this question?

Last year Question 3 was an analysis of a critical commentary, for which the highest possible score was 9 points. On this year's exam Question 3 had two parts, so the highest possible score for content was 10 points (5 points for each part of the question). For the Standard Group the mean content score was 5.68. For the Total Group the mean content score was 5.42.

For the Standard Group the mean language score this year was 3.52 out of 5 possible points, nearly a half-point higher than the 3.13 score achieved by this same group in 2009. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.81, also noticeably higher than the mean score of 3.43 for this group in 2009. In fact, the Total Group earned the highest mean language score for the 2010 exam on this question.

San Manuel Bueno, mártir was the lengthiest work included in the questions on this year's exam. As the only full-length novel on the required reading list (other novels on the list, such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*, are read in abbreviated form), it occupies an important place in the curriculum and presumably receives considerable emphasis in the classroom. Students' familiarity with this work, as well as the very accessible language of the excerpt, may explain why some students achieved high scores on this question.

The best responses for part (a) clearly analyzed the ideas about religion that don Manuel expresses in his conversation with Angelina: the role of religious belief in endowing life with meaning; his doubts about the existence of an afterlife; the importance of bolstering the faith of others even in the face of his own doubt; the theological and social role of the Catholic Church in fostering belief through its teachings. While some of don Manuel's ideas are presented in expository fashion in his dialogue with Angelina, others (especially his own doubts) are expressed indirectly, through allusions, silences and tears; the best responses aptly captured the oblique and paradoxical manner in which the priest's ideas about religion are revealed in the passage. Less successful responses paraphrased or summarized the content of the passage in lieu of providing textual analysis or,

alternatively, spoke about don Manuel's suffering as a priest who doubts the precepts he imparts to others, without referring specifically to the passage.

When answering part (b), the most capable students offered clear explanations of don Manuel's influence on the narrator, Angelina, and supported their responses with appropriate examples, noting especially the role reversals that take place (judge/criminal, confessor/confessant, father/mother) in the excerpt and elsewhere in the novel. In some cases students did not adequately understand that the focus of this question was not don Manuel but rather Angelina and how she is transformed by her contact with don Manuel. Students who had not read this work or had not read it in its entirety were unable to address part (b) competently.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Paraphrasing or summarizing the passage in lieu of textual analysis
- Failing to refer specifically to the passage (for instance, discussing don Manuel's ideas about religion that appear elsewhere in the novel but are not present in the excerpt)
- Inadequate understanding of the cited passage or the novel, or both
- Insufficient supporting examples from the cited passage or the novel
- General or vague responses that suggested that students were not familiar with the novel
- Superfluous or erroneous statements
- Giving a prepared overview of Unamuno or *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* with limited connection to either part of the question
- Poor organization or limited ability to write a focused 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?

In addition to the suggestions given above to help students better prepare for and perform on the poetry analysis and thematic analysis questions, teachers might also:

- Give students two-part questions based on a number of texts on the required reading list, in order to provide them with experience doing this type of excerpt analysis; and at some point or points during the year, have students answer this type of question under conditions and time constraints that are similar to those of the AP Spanish Literature Exam;
- Encourage students to highlight or circle important words or concepts in the questions;
- Teach students how to write effective thesis statements and conclusions; and
- Help students develop and practice a list of vocabulary, 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 writing anecdotal commentaries.

Since the text analysis question can be based on any work on the reading list, it is essential that students read each work completely. Teachers can further assist students by showing them how to do a close reading of all the works, including consideration of vocabulary and linguistic and stylistic features, regardless of the genre.