



Student Performance Q&A:

2010 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2010 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Ernie Freeberg of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. 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 analyze the ways in which Puritan ideas and values influenced the political, social and economic development of the New England colonies from 1630 through the 1660s. The question measured students' grasp of intellectual and social history in the colonial period by focusing on religion and social life in Puritan New England.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed reasonably well — the mean score was 3.43 out of a possible 9 points. They were comfortable discussing and analyzing all the documents, and no one document was consistently misused, misinterpreted or omitted. Students had little difficulty with the eighteenth-century language used in most of the documents. Better essays developed a sophisticated discussion of the ways in which religious ideas shaped Puritan New England and included supporting historical information.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common problem was the lack of relevant outside information. Many essays were descriptive rather than analytical in nature, describing Puritanism in Massachusetts Bay without focusing on its influence in the rest of New England. Students also tended to string together long quotations from the documents, which interrupted the flow of the essay. Most responses were particularly weak in discussing the economic component of the question; some students conflated social and economic factors. The Nathaniel Ward document was sometimes misinterpreted as supporting the idea of freedom of religion, and the John Higginson document frequently led to assertions that Puritans did not value money or trade. Students also tended to write essays comparing Puritan New England with the Chesapeake or mid-Atlantic colonies.

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?

- Encourage students to synthesize the information that is in the documents rather than paraphrasing or quoting the documents.
- Teach students to use the main idea of a document in support of their thesis and to place the document in historical context using relevant supporting information.
- Emphasize continually that students should use the documents as cues to trigger recollection of relevant outside information to include in their responses.
- Train students to focus on answering the question that has been asked and to explicitly address each component of the question.
- Remind students that attention to chronological sequencing is necessary as well.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to explain why the American colonies were victorious in the Revolutionary War and to analyze, in an integrated manner, how political, diplomatic and military factors were crucial to the United States victory.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed adequately — the mean score was 3.57 out of a possible 9 points. Most students knew something about each of the three categories, and the responses were frequently two to three pages long. Students displayed a solid understanding of general military factors. They also were knowledgeable about diplomacy, especially Benjamin Franklin serving as ambassador to France. The Battle of Saratoga and subsequent French aid were referenced in many essays. Responses that included Yorktown and other battles tended to be better responses. However, discussions of political factors were not as strong as many AP Exam Readers thought they would be. *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence were frequently cited, and good responses often referenced the First and Second Continental Congresses.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had difficulty writing an integrated response. Answers were commonly three paragraphs about the three factors with little analysis of how these factors worked together to assure the American victory. Theses were often paraphrases of the question. Students sometimes wrote the answer they wanted to write, rather than the answer the question required. Specific information that Readers expected in the answers — the Declaration of Independence, Lexington and Concord, the Olive Branch Petition, for example — was not always included. Chronology was often incorrect: Some students wrote about the coming of the Revolution or, in a few cases, another American war such as the Civil War. Many students cited a fair amount of prerevolutionary information but did not link it to the question or, in some cases, did not understand that it was outside the time period.

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?

- Work with students on answering the question that has been asked. A good essay that is largely made up of irrelevant material is not going to earn a high score. Essays have to be analytical and based on a clear, well-developed thesis.
- Help students gain an understanding of chronology and change over time, which was evident in better responses.
- Remind students that relevant details are important. For this question, anecdotes about key leaders helped strong essays develop a nuanced and thoughtful response to the prompt.
- Ensure that students understand common terms, such as “diplomacy.”

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This mainstream question is from a significant period of U.S. history (1845–1861) and tested students’ understanding of events leading to the Civil War. It gave students an opportunity to display their knowledge about the spread of slavery into the western territories and then link their chosen events to the coming of war.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.65 out of a possible 9 points. Many essays lacked analysis — students typically failed to see how the issues of expansionism and slavery related to the coming of the Civil War. However, there were a number of top-scoring essays that demonstrated impressive analysis, included substantial and relevant historical information, and showed insightful recognition of cause and effect and change over time. These essays effectively interwove the relationship of Manifest Destiny with the coming of the Civil War and addressed 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 change over time and cause and effect. For instance, they knew some facts about popular sovereignty and the Kansas–Nebraska Act but failed to link them. Responses had vague generalizations (“slavery was a hot button issue”) and were chronologically incorrect. For example, students included information on the Three-Fifths Compromise, the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, Black Codes, and Martin Luther King Jr. Those essays that were anchored within the question’s chronology tended to ignore or skim over the 1840s. A disappointing number of responses were explanations of why the North won the Civil War or descriptions of the institution of slavery.

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?

- Teach students that themes such as slavery and sectionalism extend over broad time periods. This question required students to synthesize information found in several different textbook chapters.

- Emphasize change over time and the long-term and short-term causes of wars. Give students consistent instruction and writing practice in a variety of essay formats: chronology, cause and effect, and change over time.
- Encourage students first to consider the intent and focus of the question and then to write analytically; always stress analysis rather than recitation of factual information.
- Emphasize that students must address *all* parts of the question and discuss the entire time period of the question. There should be continual instruction on chronology.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze the roles that women played in Progressive Era reforms from the 1880s through 1920 regarding two of three topics: politics, social conditions, and labor and working conditions. The question required students to draw conclusions regarding women’s roles, make an argument, and support the argument with historical evidence drawn from the topics and periods chosen.

How well did the students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.86 out of a possible 9 points. There was a wide range of answers, from very general descriptions of women’s roles in Progressive Era reforms to more specific and analytical treatments of two topics. Some essays had very specific analysis of women’s roles in reforms, such as the reasons for women’s involvement, class differences affecting the roles of women, divisions within women’s efforts (e.g., the women’s suffrage movement), and specific organizations in which women played a role, including the organizations’ goals and leaders.

No particular topic appeared to be chosen more than others, although essays often had more specific historical information on politics and social conditions than on labor and working conditions. Students sometimes interwove the topics in their essays — for example, linking women’s roles in reforming social conditions with their activities in labor reform, or interweaving politics with both social conditions and labor/working conditions. However, some essays were uneven in their treatment of the two topics chosen.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students misinterpreted the question — they described the roles of women in Progressive Era reform rather than analyzing and reaching a conclusion about those roles. Some mistakenly wrote about Progressive reforms themselves rather than the roles of women, while others described the changing status of women in American society during the era rather than the roles of women in reform. Students often had difficulty with chronology; even those who were knowledgeable about the roles of women in various political, social and labor reforms often included historical information from outside of the time period (e.g., Lowell factory girls, Dorothea Dix, Seneca Falls, the Declaration of Sentiments, Lucretia Mott, abolitionism, flappers, NOW, Betty Friedan); these references were often linked to reform but not to the question being asked. Students also wrote about the changing status of women during the period rather than women’s roles in Progressive Era reforms.

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?

- Encourage the development of analytical thinking rather than mere recitation of factual information. Reinforce analytical and writing skills through explicit instruction in writing essays that answer historical questions and require analysis.
- Stress the importance of writing a clear thesis that explicitly answers the question.
- Use thematic reviews that will help students address a question that covers a broad spectrum.
- Help students gain an understanding of chronology. Emphasize periodization when teaching social history.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to explain the causes and consequences of two of the three designated population movements (suburbanization, the growth of the Sun Belt, and immigration to the United States) during the period 1945–1985. Students were expected to provide contextual and factual information as to the causes and resulting changes arising from these key demographic shifts in the United States.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.24 out of a possible 9 points. The question asked students to address causes and consequences, which produced many essays that were quite sophisticated. Students were able to discuss demographic change and its broader implications. However, most essays did not cover the entire time period.

Almost all students chose suburbanization as one of their two selected movements, with immigration to the United States coming in a close second. The growth of the Sun Belt was a distant third but was often handled better than the other two when it was selected. Few students clearly delineated the change over time in either the causes or consequences of the population movements, though better essays were able to do so, especially with respect to immigration.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There was a dearth of factual information in many responses; instead, students often made sweeping generalizations asserted as facts, with little or no historical substantiation to back them up. There seemed to be less of a sense of chronology than in years past as well. Students frequently strayed out of the time period or missed it completely, especially when discussing immigration; they often confused the post–World War II period with earlier nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigration movements, such as Irish emigration because of the potato famine.

Many responses contained factual errors or information from out of the time period. Some students saw this as a Cold War or civil rights question and were unable to stay on topic as a result. There was a great deal of discussion about the Red Scare and McCarthyism, which was usually not used appropriately.

Students tended to be stronger on causes than on consequences. Additionally, far too many students seemed to equate causality with only one thing (inexpensive automobiles or the baby boom, for example) rather than seeing movements as having multiple or multifaceted causes and consequences.

Better essays were able to show change over time, especially when discussing consequences of the population movements.

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?

- Encourage students to read the question carefully and only answer the question asked. Changing a question into something the student thinks that he or she can answer may produce an excellent essay, but it ultimately results in a low score because the student did not answer the question.
- Review timelines and dates of specific historical events so that students develop a sense of chronology. A better link between social/economic/cultural movements and historical events is needed.
- Continue to reinforce the critical importance of backing up assertions with factual, specific information.
- Emphasize multiple causes, and instruct students to write answers that cover the entire time period of the question.