



Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP® European History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 free-response questions for AP® European History were written by the Chief Reader, Jeffrey Hamilton of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. 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The purpose of the document-based question (DBQ) is to assess the degree to which students can analyze various types of historical documents in order to construct a meaningful analytical essay. Students' essays are evaluated on the extent to which they meet the requirements specified in the core scoring guidelines. Students who exceed these requirements can earn additional points in the expanded core, which is based on holistic assessment.

This particular DBQ asked students to construct a response to a two-task prompt. Students were first asked to identify ideas about gender that influenced the reign of Elizabeth I. Second, students were expected to explain how Elizabeth responded to these ideas. The documents comprised a variety of perspectives, including those critical of the idea of a woman ruler, those held by Elizabeth's supporters and close associates, and Elizabeth's own views.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.49 out of a possible 9 points. Most students recognized both tasks set by the prompt and attempted to address each of them. The majority of responses contained at least one idea about gender linked to either religious or political aspects of Elizabeth I's reign, followed by some analysis of the ways in which Elizabeth responded to these ideas.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students failed to provide an appropriate, explicitly stated thesis by omitting one or the other of the tasks. For instance, some students did not provide specific examples of ideas about gender, whereas others presented ideas about gender but failed to identify Elizabeth's responses.

Many students had difficulty recognizing the nuances implicit in documents 5, 6 and 8. By far the most problematic document, however, was number 7. Many students saw the author of that document (the Catholic priest Edward Rishton) as supportive of and praising Elizabeth's policies, whereas in fact Rishton is critical of the practice of celebrating Elizabeth's birthday with greater pomp than the feast of the Virgin Mary.

Many students, even those who presented otherwise sophisticated essays, failed to analyze point of view in the requisite number of documents. As a result, these students were not awarded the point-of-view core point, which held the score to 5 points.

Students who presented a clear and explicit thesis that addressed both tasks almost always went on to earn the core point for grouping. In fact most students were easily able to form three appropriate groups in response to the question. Although there was opportunity for students to address change over time in their analysis of the documents, few did.

Surprisingly, given the mainstream nature of the topic, few students provided much in the way of relevant outside information. This may have prevented some from earning points in the expanded core.

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?

Remember that the DBQ is a *skills-based* exercise. Providing solid instruction in developing the following skills will result in higher scores:

- *Thesis*: Students require frequent practice in developing a thesis that addresses all aspects of the question. Additionally, the thesis should appear in the opening paragraph of the essay, and ideally all components of the thesis should be contained in one clear, concise and comprehensive sentence.
- *Point of view*: Students need to be taught to identify point-of-view analysis in ways that explain *why* the author or source of the document makes the claims stated. They must move beyond a simple statement that an author has a bias. Even when evaluating the reliability of the source or when recognizing that different sources serve different purposes, students must be thorough in explaining the author's perspective or the document's purpose.
- *Grouping*: Note that workable, meaningful grouping is driven by the development of a solid thesis. Students should analyze the documents to impose order on them, thereby creating acceptable groupings that address the question. Good essay organization is important in this regard; topic sentences that indicate the theme of the paragraph suggest that a student has organized the documents purposefully. Simply mixing documents in a paragraph without regard to whether they support the topic of the paragraph and are linked to each other will not earn credit for the point involving the use of the documents to support the thesis.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to perform four tasks: analyze two factors influencing the centralization of Spain and two factors influencing the fragmentation of Italy. The question did not require, but allowed for the possibility of, comparing and contrasting the two regions. In addition to identifying two factors for each region, students had to provide specific evidence to support their arguments.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.82 out of a possible 9 points. Most students who chose this question presented some relevant information. Even the weaker essays at least mentioned Ferdinand and Isabella for Spain and the role of the city-states in Italy. Stronger essays contained explicit linkages between the evidence presented and the question of centralization in Spain or fragmentation in Italy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students overwhelmingly knew far more about Spain than about Italy. It was very common for an essay to have several detailed factors about Spain but only general information about Italy. The most common error was to move outside the time frame of the question. Few essays were completely off topic, but it was not uncommon for a student to include one appropriate factor for either Spain or Italy and then to move out of the time frame for their second factor. For example, a student might write about Ferdinand and Isabella unifying Aragon and Castile and then discuss Philip II's attempted domination of England and the sinking of the Armada.

Another common problem was that students would include appropriate information but not connect it to the themes of Spanish centralization or Italian fragmentation. For example, many essays included detailed discussions of Spanish exploration with no reference to its impact on centralization; others discussed at length the Renaissance in Italy with no attempt to show how it might have affected fragmentation.

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?

- Remind students that the evidence they present needs to be explicitly tied to the question. Students who knew a lot about exploration or the Renaissance did not necessarily do well on the question because they often did not explain the linkage between exploration and centralization or between the Renaissance and fragmentation.
- Make an effort to cover the material in the textbooks more fully. In this case, most textbooks place developments in Italy during the period 1450–1550 at the end of a long chapter on developing national monarchies, which may account for weaker treatment of Italy in most students' responses.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to perform two tasks: identify similarities and difference between Enlightenment and Romantic views of the natural world. Although textbooks usually present the topic as a contrast in perspectives, with Romanticism rejecting much of the worldview of the Enlightenment philosophes, the question called for students to discuss similarities as well.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.83 out of a possible 9 points. Although many students displayed minimal understanding of the two cultural movements, the ablest students demonstrated a significant degree of preparation, and many made good use of references to artists and literary works not found in a typical textbook used in the AP European History course. Most students interpreted the word “nature” in the question as intended (the natural world), although some responses dealt with the topics of human nature and its implications for social and political institutions. Responses that took the latter approach were generally accepted as addressing the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

One common omission was not addressing one of the two tasks explicitly set forth in the question. Too many responses failed to discuss *both* a comparison (similarity) and a contrast (difference). Many otherwise competent essays only examined differences. Another common error had to do with students’ generally poor grasp of chronology and periodization: Many responses cited as examples of either Enlightenment- or Romantic-era figures individuals who did not in fact belong to either 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?

- Familiarize students with the prompts for analytical questions and instruct them in the mechanics of analytical writing.
- Emphasize the importance of mastering historical periodization. Many publishers currently maintain interactive timelines available to schools or individual teachers at minimal or no cost.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to analyze four factors: the political and economic problems of both England and France in the periods before, respectively, the English Civil War (1642–1649) and the French Revolution (1789–1799). The question did not require, but allowed for the possibility of, comparing and contrasting the causes of the two political upheavals. The question also did not specify whether long-term or short-term problems should be discussed.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.90 out of a possible 9 points. Many essays had a thesis statement (even if it was not fully responsive), and almost all showed some degree of organization because the prompt pointed them toward an organization (usually by country). However, many students knew more about one country than they did about the other. Some essays provided detailed knowledge of the events in one country but could say little about events in the other country. The weakest essays typically offered vague generalizations about the kinds of problems monarchies are likely to have and sometimes provided a few facts relevant to the time period (like the high price of bread in France). Stronger essays could speak about both countries in some detail, while the very best ones thoughtfully described multiple causes for the chaos in both countries.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Coverage of the two countries was uneven in many essays. These unbalanced essays seemed approximately evenly split between those focusing more heavily on events in England and those focusing on events in France. Another common omission was not answering all four parts of the question (for example, essays offering analysis of economic and political factors for France, but only economic factors for England). There was no clear pattern of one of the four parts of the question being more frequently ignored than the others.

A third common error involved discussing events beyond the time frame of the question (for example, the Civil War period, the Interregnum, and the Glorious Revolution in England, and events after the autumn of 1789, including the Terror and Napoleon, in France) or confusing the chronology of events. Some common factual errors included assuming that a major cause of the English Civil War was peasant unrest, and that peasants in both England and France wanted the vote.

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?

- Continue to emphasize the importance of reading the question carefully and answering all its parts.
- Train students to tie the examples they provide to the essay thesis explicitly, to ensure that they receive credit for supporting their argument with evidence.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to connect three developments causally — industrialization, imperialism and consumer culture. Given the period specified (1850–1914), the question required students to discuss the Second Industrial Revolution and European “new imperialism” in Africa and Asia. The term “consumer culture” called for an analysis of the cultural and social effects of economic developments. References merely to consumer “goods” did not fully address the intent of the question.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.29 out of a possible 9 points. Students seemed to have found it difficult to address all tasks. Those essays scoring near the top of the range exhibited a stronger sense of chronology and discussed specific social and cultural developments — increase in leisure time, urban reform, advertising, “conspicuous consumption,” new technologies — that marked the emergence of a mass society and a middle-class sensibility from 1850 to 1914. Most responses, however, showed difficulty in locating the appropriate historical context and referred only generally to new goods and technologies or went outside the period for a more generic and sometimes United States–focused discussion of consumerism.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students struggled with the concept of “consumer culture,” often interpreting it as merely the increase in the quantity and variety of consumer goods due to mass production. A number of responses referenced out-of-period developments related to the First Industrial Revolution, for example, innovations in textile production, the steam engine and early urbanization. The discussion of imperialism in many essays was not connected to the development of consumer culture in any meaningful way. Some responses provided only general references to new types of goods that were becoming available in Europe as a result of increased trade, but many of these examples were more characteristic of the age of exploration or the Commercial Revolution of the 15th through 18th centuries. Other responses offered sometimes detailed narratives of imperial ventures in Africa and Asia, but with little or no explicit connection to consumer culture.

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?

- Many students seem to have difficulty mastering the chronological sweep of the course, especially in having a clear sense of the features that define particular historical eras. Many students would benefit from further exercises in chronological thinking or periodization.
- Teachers should continue to emphasize the importance of cause-effect relationships and patterns of continuity and change over time.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to address differences between the policies of Vladimir Lenin and the policies of Joseph Stalin. The question did not require students to identify similarities or continuities between the two leaders’ policies, but many student responses addressed continuities by way of highlighting the differences. Students needed to show evidence that they understood key policies of both Lenin and Stalin in the context of their discussion about policy transformations.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.90 out of a possible 9 points. The topic receives extensive coverage in most European history textbooks, and most students who chose the question were able to generate

responses that provided a relatively good level of historical detail and degree of specificity. Students generally understood correctly that the term “policies” required them to discuss more than one policy of both Lenin and Stalin, although many responses covered Stalin’s policies better than they did Lenin’s. It was not uncommon to find essays that demonstrated a high level of analytical thinking, backed by ample supporting evidence.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Perhaps the most common error was presenting a rather simplistic contrasting portrayal of the two Soviet leaders and their policies. For example, many essays portrayed Lenin in an idealized fashion, mistakenly claiming that he was a largely benevolent figure who was looking out for the Russian working class and peasantry, only to have his policies reversed by a dictatorial and opportunistic Stalin. Other, less common errors included attributing the policies of Lenin to Stalin or vice versa, or conflating Stalin’s Five Year Plans for industrialization with his agricultural collectivization policies. Even the best essays tended to have more supporting evidence for Stalin than for Lenin.

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 taught to respond to all the tasks set by the prompt. In this case, the term “policies” required at least two examples for each figure, and students had to address the issue of changes between the two figures’ policies.
- There was also some evidence of confusion between Lenin and Stalin, suggesting that mastering historical context and chronology continues to pose a challenge for some students.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess students’ understanding of the process of Western European integration from 1945 to the present. The question required students to organize their response according to two analytic categories — economic and political — and to support their analysis with specific evidence. The question did not require students to address issues such as the desirability, causes or success of Western European integration but left this possibility open.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.18 out of a possible 9 points. Many students deftly handled both tasks set by the question, addressing both economic and political integration, and providing specific evidence for both. Responses typically mentioned the European Coal and Steel Commission, the European Economic Community, and the introduction of the euro as examples of economic integration, and the Maastricht Treaty/European Union as an example of political integration. Many essays also referred to the political implications for European integration of the creation of the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Many essays successfully discussed specific actions or policies by individual Western European countries that have influenced the process of integration in various ways.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A relatively common problem was not presenting a clear and specific thesis that explicitly addressed the question. Instead of a valid thesis, many responses offered only a statement on the historical background or causes of the integration process (for example, the experience of the Second World War), followed by a paraphrase of the question. Another common error was failing to demonstrate *how* a particular organization or treaty referred to in the essay contributed to economic or political integration. Many students seem to have struggled with the requirement that their essays refer to at least two nations — a number of responses simply listed countries instead of providing adequate references. Probably the most common deficiency in essays was the lack of specificity — making assertions without evidence to prove them.

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?

- Remind students that they need to take time to read the question carefully so that they completely understand the task(s) the question is setting before they begin to write.
- Teach students that an effective thesis responds to all parts of the question and gives the reader a clear sense of what direction the essay will be taking.
- Help students understand that *asserting* an idea without specific evidence is not an effective way to build a compelling argument.