



Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP® Spanish Literature Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 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. The selection was "Momento," a five-stanza, 20-verse poem by Alfonsina Storni. Students were asked to analyze the theme of solitude that is presented in the poem and to analyze the integration of poetic language and devices with the poem's theme.

How well did students perform on this question?

Each of the three free-response questions constitutes 20 percent of the total exam score and 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* on question 1 was 5.15 out of 9 possible points, an increase when compared with the score of 4.82 earned by this group in 2010. For the Total Group the mean score for content was 4.96, also representing a gain compared with the mean score of 4.60 in 2010.

The mean score for language in the Standard Group was 3.48 out of 5 possible points, a very slight decrease from this group's mean score of 3.56 in 2010. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.76, very close to the mean language score of 3.77 for the same group on the 2010 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 text selected for this year's poetry analysis question was distinguished by straightforward syntax and vocabulary yet also was characterized by a richness of poetic language and devices, thus lending it to substantive discussion of the theme of solitude. This theme proved accessible to students with differing levels of analytical ability. As presented in the poem, the theme encompasses different forms of solitude (amorous, existential). Both these interpretations were acceptable as long as students provided textual references to support their analysis. The question directed students to analyze the integration of poetic language and devices with the poem's theme; this made explicit their task in order to answer the question competently. The best responses identified many examples of rhetorical figures (including personification, simile, metaphor, images, contrast/antithesis, gradation and hyperbole) and analyzed how Storni uses them to communicate the theme of solitude. They also pointed to abundant examples of poetic language that convey this theme (asyndeton, ellipsis, enjambment; vocabulary centered on solitude, death and absence of love; symbolic predominance of the colors gray and black; poetic tone that expresses anguished loneliness).

The strongest responses were distinguished by insightful analysis, originality of interpretation, or both. For instance, at a surface level the poem deals with spatial elements: the "*huesos grises*" of buildings; the grid of streets; the movement of "*dos millones de hombres*" through the urban landscape. However, some of the most perceptive essays also analyzed the temporal dimension implied by the poem's title, "Momento." Many strong responses emphasized the contrast between the motion of people and natural elements versus the figurative death of the poetic speaker's heart; in this context they remarked on the passivity or powerlessness of the poetic speaker as seen in the extinguishing of the poet's voice and the metaphoric subjugation of her body by the heavy skies, the turbulent whirlwind, and the angular geometry of the city streets. As an example of the interconnection of form and content, some students insightfully discussed how the irregular length of the stanzas in the poem and the use of free verse exemplified the chaotic or fragmentary nature of metropolitan life and the poet's experience of desolation and lovelessness. Better responses also commented frequently on the significance of the images of the body present in the poem ("*mis pies*," "*mis arterias*," "*mi voz*," "*mi corazón*"). Students whose essays suggested (but did not demonstrate) competence often tended to paraphrase the poem rather than analyze it, or had difficulty connecting poetic form with thematic content. The weakest responses failed to address the theme or else wrote about solitude as a general human experience without relating it to the poem itself. Often they demonstrated a lack of understanding of the poem and were unable 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 (city life, love, nature, etc.) without focusing on the question or the poem itself
- Citing examples of poetic language or listing or defining poetic devices found in the poem without analyzing how they are integrated into the poem's theme
- Not including specific textual references
- Not mentioning form as related to the poem's content
- Demonstrating 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?

The poetry question appears on the exam every year, and 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 AP Spanish Literature Exam will help students to refine their skills and become better equipped to write a well-developed and organized treatment of the question.

Teachers can further 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 can suggest that students underline or circle the important parts of the question — in this case the theme of solitude, how the poetic devices and language are integrated into this theme, and the need for specific supporting examples from the poem itself. This type of exercise trains students to remember to fully address the question. Teaching them to take a few minutes to outline their responses and to reserve some time for proofreading, editing and correcting elements of their work is another valuable practice.

Throughout the AP Spanish Literature course, teachers can help their students by doing the following:

- Involve the class in small-group work or, in a prewriting phase, have students share their thoughts concerning a poem’s theme, its form, and the poetic language and devices it employs.
- Work regularly with students on literary vocabulary, such as the various rhetorical devices or figures of speech and rhyme and meter.
- Teach students how to better identify poetic devices and their effects.
- Encourage students to write more than one draft of an essay on any given poem.
- Make peer review among students part of the editing process.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Two types of thematic analysis question are possible: the first is an analysis of a given theme or topic in one work from the reading list; the second involves the comparison of a given theme or topic in two works from the required reading list. This year’s question was of the former type. Students were asked to write an essay analyzing the theme of obsession as a factor that alters human conduct in one work chosen from a list of four titles: Horacio Quiroga’s “El hijo,” Jorge Luis Borges’s “La muerte y la brújula,” Gabriel García Márquez’s “La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar,” and Federico García Lorca’s *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. These titles provided a diverse selection of 20th-century works from Spain and Latin America (Uruguay, Argentina, Colombia) as well as examples of different literary genres (short story, play). The scope of the question was broadened by virtue of the many and varied examples of obsession (psychological, sexual, philosophical, political, artistic) that distinguish the characters in these works and affect their behavior.

How well did students perform on this question?

For the Standard Group the mean content score was 5.38 out of 9 possible points, compared with the score of 4.74 earned by the same group in 2010. The mean content score for the Total Group was 5.17, a full point higher than the score of 4.18 in 2010.

The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.51 out of 5 possible points, comparable to the score of 3.49 on the 2010 exam. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.76, an increase from the score of 3.50 in 2010.

Because this year's question required students to discuss only a single work chosen from a list of four, the range of available options was quite broad; each one offered clear examples of how characters' obsessive thinking influenced their behavior. "El hijo" and *La casa de Bernarda Alba* were the texts most frequently selected to answer this question. Of the four options, "La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar" was used least. Some students may not have read the story: of the six García Márquez stories on the reading list, teachers need only choose three to study in class. Moreover, compared with the works by Quiroga, García Lorca and Borges, this one required more careful consideration because the theme is less obviously presented.

In approaching the theme students were not expected to propose a clinical definition of obsession; in practice, they tended to view obsession as a mental fixation, a persistent and unshakeable preoccupation or compulsion that influences a person's behavior. Because the question required students to analyze how obsession alters human conduct, answers that merely listed one or more characters' obsession(s) received lower scores than those that showed how these obsessions exerted a transformative effect on the characters' behavior or perhaps led characters to persist in a certain conduct even when reason or society would expect them to behave otherwise.

Regardless of the work they chose, students resorted to three basic approaches to the question: analysis of the obsession(s) of one character; analysis of a particular obsession as seen in several characters; or analysis of the different obsessions of multiple characters. All were acceptable approaches, provided that the essays included appropriate examples from the chosen text.

Students who used Quiroga's story focused principally on the father's obsession to protect his son, noting how the gun he gives him ironically leads to the tragedy he wished to avert; as many observed, this obsessive mindset prevents him from perceiving later in the story that his son is dead. Similarly, *La casa de Bernarda Alba* provided ample material: many students analyzed Bernarda's obsession with gossip and appearances as well as her need to control the lives of all the members of her household. Some also addressed Adela's and María Josefa's single-minded determination to escape Bernarda's dictatorship over the enclosed space of the house, Martirio's obsession with Pepe el Romano, or Adela's unstoppable drive to attain sexual freedom. Essays that analyzed this theme in "La muerte y la brújula" centered on Lönnrot's extreme dependence on rationalism to solve a string of crimes, thus delivering himself unintentionally into the hands of the perpetrator, Red Scharlach. Those students who discussed García Márquez's story tended to analyze Baltazar's obsession with creating a perfect work of art (the birdcage he is making for Pepe Montiel); in some instances they analyzed Chepe Montiel's role as a petty tyrant who is obsessed with wealth and power, or, in a related strategy, they contrasted Baltazar's selfless dedication to his art with those characters who as capitalists are obsessed with the monetary rather than the aesthetic value of the cage.

The strongest essays relied on appropriate textual examples to explore the ways in which these obsessions or monomanias modify the characters' conduct. In an insightful approach, some managed to argue convincingly that obsession in the chosen work does not always carry a negative connotation and on occasion leads to behavior that, although perhaps wrongheaded, is well intentioned or heroic. Students who interpreted obsession simply to mean "love" or "hate," or

who inaccurately equated obsession with desire, produced more limited responses, as did those whose essays were characterized by an overreliance on plot summary or a prepared overview of the selected work. Students who demonstrated unfamiliarity with the chosen work produced some of the weakest essays.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Inability to deal with the theme of obsession as a factor that alters human conduct in the chosen work
- Superficial development of the theme
- Excessive plot summary and minimal analysis
- Insufficient supporting examples from the chosen work
- General or vague responses that suggested students were not familiar with the work
- Superfluous or erroneous statements
- Not following the instructions to focus on analysis of a single work and instead writing a comparison of two texts
- 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 successful response to the thematic analysis question begins with a careful reading of the question itself and continues with an answer that fully treats the topic — in this case the theme of obsession as a factor that alters human conduct — with supporting textual references. The best essays contained specific examples to support the students' ideas, and the ideas were presented in a systematic, explicit and logical manner. It is imperative that students clearly state which work(s) they are treating and limit their response to that work or works, as stipulated by the instructions.

Teachers can help their students achieve good essay scores by doing the following:

- Remind students of the importance of reading all the works on the required reading list.
- Give students in-class writing practice with all aspects of essay composition: prewriting, outlining, writing, editing and proofreading.
- Ask students to act as editors of their own essays, an exercise that can help them recognize problems in their work and refine their essay-writing skills.
- Help students learn to stay focused on the topic by routinely pointing out content in their essays that is superfluous or irrelevant to the subject.
- Teach students to distinguish analysis from mere paraphrasing or plot summary.
- Teach students how to develop and properly support their ideas.

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. When the question is based on a critical commentary, students must present their analysis in the form of an essay; when the question is based on a textual fragment from a literary work, two shorter, analytical responses are required. This year's question was of the former type. It was based on an excerpt from *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*, a book by the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov, in which he defines the concept of the fantastic as the vacillation experienced by an individual who inhabits the known world of natural laws when suddenly confronted with an event that appears to be supernatural or otherworldly, defying rational explanation. This indecision, according to Todorov, makes the individual question the boundaries that ostensibly separate what is real from what is unreal. Students were asked to analyze how the ideas in the excerpt from Todorov's commentary are reflected in Julio Cortázar's short story "La noche boca arriba."

How well did students perform on this question?

Last year the third question had two parts for students to answer, so the highest possible score for content was 10 points. This year question 3 was an analysis of a critical commentary in relation to "La noche boca arriba," and the highest possible score was 9 points.

For the Standard Group, the mean content score was 4.28 out of 9 possible points. The mean content score for the Total Group was 3.67. These were the lowest mean content scores earned by both groups on the free-response section of this year's exam.

The mean language score for the Standard Group this year was 3.28 out of 5 possible points, somewhat lower than the 2010 mean score of 3.52. For the Total Group, the mean language score was 3.27, a decrease from the mean score of 3.81 for this group in 2010. The mean language scores for both groups on this question were the lowest on the free-response section of this year's exam.

The pairing of the passage from Todorov with Cortázar's "La noche boca arriba" represented a good match. The fragment excerpted from *Introducción a la literatura fantástica* introduces several ideas whose application to the story could be analyzed by students in their essays: the existence of two possible solutions to account for an apparently incomprehensible incident — one that follows natural laws versus one that is supernatural; the triggering of a hesitant response in the perceiver who experiences this mysterious event; and the definition of the fantastic as a vacillation of someone only acquainted with the physical laws of everyday reality in the face of what seems to be a supernatural event.

Students who performed well on this question were able to exemplify Todorov's notion of the fantastic using the alternation experienced by the protagonist of Cortázar's story between 20th-century life (the young motorcycle victim in the hospital) and the pre-conquest Mexican world (the young *moteca* Indian pursued by Aztec warriors in the swamp). The most perceptive essays analyzed the structural parallels between the dreaming protagonist and Cortázar's reader, both of whom are subject to the vacillation that Todorov mentions as a key element of the fantastic genre, and they posited the active role of the reader in constructing meaning in the story. Essays in which students did not correctly apply the ideas in Todorov's quote to "La noche boca arriba" or in which plot summary overshadowed analysis were less effective. In the weakest essays, students either did not understand the question or the quotation or else failed to comprehend the principal feature

of the story's plot: the alternation between two independent realities (present/past, hospital/sacrificial altar) and the surprising denouement of the story, when the real and the seeming dream world are inverted. As a result they were unable to apply the quote to the story. Students who had not read Cortázar's work were unable to answer the question competently.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Paraphrasing the quotation instead of analyzing how the ideas it presents are reflected in Cortázar's story
- Analyzing only one of the ideas in the quotation
- Demonstrating inadequate understanding of the quotation
- Providing insufficient supporting examples from the story
- Offering general or vague responses that suggested an unfamiliarity with the story
- Making superfluous or erroneous statements
- Relying on a prepared overview of "La noche boca arriba" without addressing the question
- Showing 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?

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 wish to do the following:

- Give students questions that apply critical commentaries to a number of texts on the required reading list in order to provide them with experience answering this type of textual analysis question.
- At some point during the year, have students answer this kind of question under conditions and constraints similar to those of the AP Spanish Literature Exam.
- Encourage students to highlight or circle important words or concepts in both the critical commentary and the question.
- Teach students how to write effective thesis statements and conclusions.
- Work with students on developing and practicing a list of vocabulary words, expressions and transitional phrases so that they learn how to link sentences and paragraphs while integrating comments of an analytical nature, as opposed to, for example, writing anecdotal commentaries.
- Guide students through a close reading of all the works on the required reading list, including a consideration of vocabulary and linguistic and stylistic features, regardless of the genre. Such preparation will help students when answering all three free-response questions on the exam.