



Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Ernest 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 international and domestic challenges the United States faced between 1968 and 1974 and to evaluate how Richard Nixon's administration responded to them. The question measured students' grasp of international and domestic issues between 1968 and 1974 and the Nixon administration's reaction to those challenges.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed reasonably well on the document-based question. The mean score was 3.44 out of a possible 9 points. Students were comfortable discussing and analyzing most of the documents and seemed less likely to quote the documents than in some previous years. Students used all the documents well, and the better essays provided analysis, set the documents in context with outside information, and had extensive breadth and depth of coverage. Most essays answered all parts of the question, stating the international and domestic challenges and the responses to each.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common problem was the lack of relevant outside information. Weaker essays tended to lack breadth of coverage, focusing mostly on Watergate and Vietnam and ignoring other challenges. Many essays were descriptive rather than analytical in nature. Some students misinterpreted Document E, which dealt with the southern strategy, by viewing it as an attempt by the Nixon administration to gain African American support. Many essays parroted Document H, which outlined Nixon administration energy proposals. A number of responses lacked solid categories and simply explained what each document said, followed by a brief account of what that meant, without relating it back to the thesis.

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 the document to support their thesis.
- Make students aware that the documents are meant to trigger recollection of relevant outside information to include in their responses.
- Train students to focus on answering all parts of the question they are asked (in this case identifying both challenges and responses).
- Train students to be able to clearly identify categories rather than simply responding to each document in the order in which it appears.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to have students analyze the origins and development of slavery over time. The expectation was for students to exhibit some understanding of the factors that led to the spread of slavery, as well as characteristics of slavery in British North America as it developed over the period 1607–1776.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.81 out of a possible 9 points. Although students showed some understanding of slavery’s origins (the precursors, American Indian slavery and indentured servitude, as well as the background of Spanish and Portuguese slavery), they were less skilled in dealing with the development of slavery. Students often dealt in a general, frequently ahistorical way with the development. Very few students chose to analyze the development of slavery over the entire course of the period given in the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students frequently omitted any discussion of slavery during the eighteenth century, with the exception of a passing reference to the triangle trade or the characteristics of the institution itself. They also conflated antebellum and colonial slavery, depending heavily on a discussion of Eli Whitney’s cotton gin, Nat Turner’s Rebellion and Harriet Tubman). Very few students understood the dialectical relationship between slave rebellions and the institution of harsh slave codes and treatment by owners. Students who discussed regional variations in the colonies often did so in a vague, general way.

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?

- Train students to pay close attention to the wording of the question when crafting their responses.
- Equip students with an ability to analyze change over time and narrate a carefully explicated essay about historical causation.

- Emphasize the importance of including specific historical events, ideas, individuals and dates to give responses a rich, historical grounding. General discussions without such information often lead to disjointed, superficial and ahistorical responses.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to what extent political parties contributed to national unity in the United States between 1790 and 1840. It required them to explain the people, ideas and events related to the development of the first and second party systems and then to show how these people, ideas and events led to national unity or disunity. Students were expected to understand cause and effect, as well as change over time.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.25 out of a possible 9 points. A surprising number of students simply wrote essays about what political parties are and why we have them — essays that were generally devoid of relevant historical information and did not address the time period of the question.

Students who wrote better essays explained the origins of the first and second party systems in the context of the extent to which they contributed to national unity. These students were able to support their argument with relevant and chronologically correct historical information. Even students who wrote essays that earned lower scores tended to include a fair amount of historical information on the first party system, though not all the information was relevant to the support of their thesis. However, many students were not quite as familiar with the development of the second party system, and when they wrote about it, they concentrated almost entirely on Andrew Jackson and the demise of the Second Bank of the United States. They rarely covered the entire time period.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students misread the question and wrote essays about the extent of unity/disunity within the political parties, rather than unity/disunity within the United States. Some essays contained a great deal of historical information that was within the time period, but the information was not used to support students' arguments. Students often wrote chronological narratives of the time period that made no connection between political parties and the extent of national unity or disunity; they did not write analytical essays. Students often did not discuss the entire time period and instead focused primarily on the first party system (1790–1817) and the Era of Good Feelings (1817–1824). It was often difficult to determine which political party students were writing about in their essays. Students used the first party system terms “Democratic–Republican,” “Republican,” and “Jeffersonian Republican” interchangeably but then confused these terms with the second party system terms “National Republican” and “Republican” (the party founded in 1854), the latter of which 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?

- Help students gain a thematic as well as chronological understanding of history and be able to make connections across time periods.

- Train students to read and scrutinize an essay question, address all parts of the question, and link historical information from the time period of the question to what the question is asking them to do (analysis). Analysis should be integrated throughout the essay, not limited to the thesis and the conclusion.
- Train students to recognize cause-and-effect questions and determine the nature of the connection they must make. In this question students had to show the extent to which political parties caused unity or disunity. They also had to show how political parties changed over time, and how these changes affected unity and disunity in the United States.
- Train students to make an argument using a clear thesis, develop the argument, and then support it with relevant historical information

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to compare and contrast the ways that many Americans expressed their opposition to immigrants in the 1840s–1850s with the ways they expressed their opposition to immigrants in the 1910s–1920s. The question required students to make comparisons and to connect events (in this case, nativism or opposition to immigrants) across time periods and to demonstrate a broader understanding of themes in immigration history.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.65 out of a possible 9 points. Most students wrote about immigration in both time periods, but they did not always explicitly address the question of opposition to immigrants. In those essays that did address the question, most found similarities and differences, although occasionally essays argued for only similarities or differences. Students often structured their essays in different ways. Some students organized their essays chronologically by time periods whereas others took a thematic approach. Some essays were uneven in their treatment of the two periods; essays tended to offer more detail on the later period than on the earlier period.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students primarily described the sources and characteristics of immigration in each period rather than focusing on the differences and similarities in the ways that many Americans expressed their opposition to immigrants in the two periods. Students were confused about the chronology of the relevant information and included historical information outside of the periods 1840s–1850s and 1910s–1920s (e.g., 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement with Japan) but erroneously placed the information in the periods. Those students who wrote about American reactions to Chinese, Japanese and Latino immigration had difficulty incorporating this information into their essays in an effective way. Students compared and contrasted the sources and cultural characteristics of immigrants in each period rather than comparing and contrasting the ways American expressed opposition to immigrants in the two periods. Weaker essays only described opposition to immigrants — in one period or both — without comparing and contrasting that opposition.

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?

- Help students gain a strong sense of chronology.
- Encourage students to think analytically. This question gave students an analytical framework — comparison and contrast — that lent itself to the process of using historical information in an analytical way.
- Train students to develop and recognize thematic connections between the histories of several time periods.
- Remind students to identify the tasks of the question (compare and contrast) and key words or phrases (ways in which Americans expressed opposition) in order to better focus on exactly what the question is asking them to do.
- Train students to write a clear thesis that explicitly answers the question.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to have students compare the goals and objectives of the civil rights movement of the 1890s–1920s with that of the 1950s–1960s.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.32 out of a possible 9 points. Most students knew something about civil rights in both time periods, and the 1950s and 1960s in particular. However, students did not compare and contrast the time periods, and the responses were often either very general or muddled. Most students understood the basic goals for both periods and that strategies varied within and between the periods. Better essays were more specific rather than global in their discussion of goals and strategies specific to the leaders being discussed.

Students did better with the second period, providing more information about Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Black Panthers and Black Power. Far too many equated King's civil disobedience with gradualism and implied that Malcolm X's endorsement of violence was akin to a call for race warfare. The majority of respondents had difficulty differentiating between political activism, militancy and violence.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often inverted the goals and methods of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, equating the latter's activism with promoting violence. Many essays portrayed Washington as a separatist. Many essays offered little concrete information about Washington and Du Bois and their respective support for accommodationism and the NAACP. Essays often attributed the founding of the NAACP to Martin Luther King Jr.

Students often confused the Black Codes and Jim Crow. Additionally, a number of essays asserted that activists in the earlier period typically used violence, sometimes to end slavery and at other times to obtain equal rights. Some responses (too many to ignore as an anomaly) seemed to believe that the goal of the civil rights movement of the 1890s–1920s was to end slavery, undermining the

quality of the essays even when they demonstrated a better grasp of later movement. A number of essays brought in the pre–Civil War time period or people from that era, making reference to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Dred Scott, Harriet Tubman and Abraham Lincoln.

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?

- Help students to more fully understand the concept of comparing and contrasting and to realize the importance of chronology in seeing change over time.
- Emphasize that students need to substantiate each assertion they make with specific relevant historical evidence and information. Caution students not to make broad generalizations with little or no historical information to back them up.