



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

The following comments on the 2011 free-response questions for AP® World History were written by the Chief Reader, Merry Wiesner-Hanks of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. 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 was intended to have students assess and analyze the causes and consequences of the Green Revolution from 1945 to the present. This document-based question (DBQ) challenged students with an event that they may not have known well. However, the documents provided them with rich evidence for the causes and consequences of the program aimed at preventing hunger. Additionally, the documents could be employed in a myriad of ways, giving students ample opportunity to develop many different and creative cause-and-consequence groupings. The content of the documents allowed for grouping of consequences simply as positive and negative; other possible groupings included environmental consequences, social consequences and regional consequences. Attribution for the documents furthered students' ability to group the documents, demonstrate point of view, anticipate the need for additional documents, and provide analysis.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.34 out of a possible 9 points, higher than last year's mean of 3.03. The documents and their attributions allowed students to quickly identify their basic meaning, group them creatively, and provide analysis and point of view. For the most part, students attempted a thesis for this year's question. Because the vast majority of students identified the origin of the Green Revolution as monocausal, the thesis needed to specifically state only one cause and two consequences. If students correctly grouped documents through accurate recognition of causes and consequences, they demonstrated understanding of the documents in the group. Students continued to face challenges writing about point of view, usually not moving beyond attribution and missing the opportunity to explain why the author might hold that opinion. The request for additional documents also continues to be problematic.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The vast majority of students attempted a thesis (core point 1). However, the provision of a successful thesis proved to be more challenging. Even though students did an excellent job identifying specific consequences, they faced greater challenges identifying causes. The question clearly called for analysis of *causes*, but most students identified only a single cause, usually hunger or poverty. The scoring guidelines required students to identify only one specific cause in their theses, along with consequences that were qualified in some way. The nature of the documents led students to write about positive and negative consequences; sometimes this distinction is considered too basic, but the documents clearly led students to draw this correct conclusion about the Green Revolution. Students also identified a variety of more specific consequences through their analysis of the documents. They could have analyzed political, social, economic and cultural consequences, but efforts in this regard proved largely unsuccessful unless the student deeply engaged with the documents.

Students continue to find analysis of point of view (core point 4) challenging. Only one correct analysis of point of view was required. Some students incorporated the word “bias” into point-of-view reflections, but many offered sophisticated identifications of specific bias. Students needed to be specific about why the author responded the way he or she did. Because the graphs as well as other documents came from the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, students had the opportunity to describe why the United Nations might be presenting the information.

The request for additional document(s) (core point 6) also remains a challenge. Students recognize that they are to bring a new perspective into their analysis, but an explanation of why that perspective is important and how it would allow them to more thoroughly understand the Green Revolution was lacking. This year’s group of documents included documents by two women and by a group of peasants, so that the standard request for a document by a woman or peasant did not work, unless students were very explicit in that request, for example, including qualifying information such as specific geographic location.

The document by “Mrs. Dula,” who commented on the economic successes gained by some Mexican farming families and the spending habits of farmers’ wives, provided challenges, as students did not understand that she was being sarcastic and disdainful about the women’s spending. However, students were given credit for understanding the document as long as they recognized that it was about economic consequences of the Green Revolution.

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?

Most important, teachers are doing a very good job in instructing students on the historical skills necessary to answer the question. Most responses were directly related to the question posed, and students demonstrated reasonable levels of understanding and analysis of the documents. To continue to develop students’ writing skills about history, teachers should consider the following:

- Develop exercises to assist student learning in the three problem areas.
- Encourage students to read the prompt to identify key words before they begin to write.
- Particular to point of view, encourage students to stop employing the use of “bias” in their essays. Teach them, instead, to think in terms of how the person’s perspective might be influenced by the fact. This suggestion could also be used to analyze graphs and other visual items.

- When practicing DBO skills, encourage students to group the documents in as many ways as is possible. This will encourage students not only to probe more deeply into the documents themselves for meaning but also to think quickly on their feet by identifying key words and themes. Continual reinforcement of these valuable skills would provide students with more opportunities to practice implementation of them, which should ensure greater success in responding to historical essay questions.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This year's question about continuity and change over time asked students to identify long-distance migrations from two different world regions and to analyze the changes and continuities in these migrations from 1700 to 1900. The open nature of the question allowed students to provide a variety of global examples within a rich time period and to demonstrate their understanding of global migrations. In addition, the focus of the question, demographic changes (migrations) in the 18th and 19th centuries, is a clearly identified topic and theme in the AP World History Course Description.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed poorly on this question. The mean score was 1.16 out of a possible 9 points, much lower than last year's mean of 3.0 for the continuity and change question. Many students either did not answer the question or responded with information that was off task or outside the time period. It is notable that a large number of students chose to answer this question last, which implies that they lacked confidence in answering the question.

Students who understood the question and had appropriate content knowledge did reasonably well. They generally discussed a migration between two world regions and showed how it either changed or continued over the two-hundred-year period. In doing so, they explained the cause of the change or continuity and did so within a framework of larger global processes, such as industrialization, the plantation system and colonization. Stronger essays were generally framed and organized by the tasks (continuity, change), as opposed to being narratives and descriptions of multiple migrations. These essays also qualified the changes and continuities within the thesis statement and provided plenty of evidence of these stated processes within long-distance migration between two world regions.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although many students did attempt a thesis (core point 1), to earn this point they needed to provide an explicit and accurate statement that qualified change and continuity of long-distance migration within the time period. This proved to be the highest bar and the most difficult point for students to earn.

Many students provided general discussions of individual migrations without ever stating if these were characterized by either change or continuity (core point 2). In general, students found it easier to discuss change rather than continuity, and this remains a major obstacle for student success on this type of question.

Many students could not identify a long-distance migration that was within the required time period (core point 3). Moreover, many students discussed only the effects of migration or described larger global processes, such as the Industrial Revolution and imperialism, without any concrete

reference to migration. Some students also focused their discussion entirely on United States history without reference to two world regions.

Although many students recognized that long-distance migration took place within a context of global processes, such as industrialization and imperialism, they struggled to connect the global context to a specified change or continuity in long-distance migration between two world regions within the time period (core point 4).

Students who were successful in identifying a change or continuity generally analyzed the cause, origin or pattern of the stated long-distance migration (core point 5). However, many students were unable to identify a change or continuity in long-distance migration between two world regions within 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 learn to write thorough and concise thesis statements that make claims about the characteristics of change and continuity over time. Students struggle with historical continuity and this should be an on-going emphasis of instruction.
- Encourage students to recognize and understand the periodization outlined in the AP World History Course Description and to gain a more accurate understanding of chronology as it applies to the change-and-continuity question.
- Address all the AP themes with appropriate balance to ensure that students are adequately prepared to respond to questions about themes, such as migration.
- Train students to recall and provide evidence from various parts of the textbook, but discourage them from simply memorizing and reiterating chunks of information under standard textbook or chapter headings.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to compare the rise of two of the following empires: a West African Sudanic empire (Mali, Ghana or Songhay), the Aztec Empire or the Mongol Empire. Students were explicitly instructed to choose two empires from the list and analyze both the similarities and differences in their rise. One of the central questions of world history is: How similar and how different were historical changes in different parts of the world? For this reason, comparison is an important historical thinking skill emphasized in the AP World History course.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.28 out of a possible 9 points, higher than last year's mean of 1.86. Students seemed well prepared to respond to this prompt. Many chose to respond to this third question before responding to the other two, an indication that they felt comfortable with the demands of the question. Students were clearly comfortable addressing comparisons of empires in a generic fashion. Many responses compared empires in terms of their trade, military, religions and even geographic location. Some students discussed aspects of culture and the roles of women. Because students knew a good deal about the question, they were able to make multiple direct comparisons and provide ample evidence to support comparisons of the empires. Some students also wrote

eloquent analyses of comparisons they had identified in their responses, further demonstrating that they understand the complexity of causation in the processes of empire building.

The vast majority of responses compared the Aztec Empire and the Mongol Empire. Few students chose to compare one of the West African Sudanic empires to either the Aztecs or the Mongols, and among the responses that did, students often chose Mali. There were very few essays that compared Songhay to other empires.

What were common student errors or omissions?

One of the most common errors was not addressing all parts of the question. The prompt asked students to analyze similarities and differences in the *rise* of empires. Many students wrote responses that compared the characteristics of empires and did not specifically compare the rise of two empires. Additionally, many restated the prompt as their thesis, pointedly including the word “rise” in the thesis but without stating specific similarities or differences between empires. Not addressing the prompt in the thesis often meant that students did not address all parts of the question in their essay.

Many of the essays that included one of the West African empires did not make distinctions among the three but instead tended to generalize characteristics of “West African” empires to any one (e.g., identifying Mansa Musa as the king of Ghana). Likewise, there seemed to be some confusion about distinctions between the Aztecs and Inca (e.g., Aztecs participating in “vertical trade up mountains”).

Students often made sweeping generalizations and characterizations of empires that were inaccurate and neglected to address the nuances of the empires (e.g., the Mongols never stopped moving; the Aztecs were completely isolated; multireligious empires were always tolerant). Although students were often able to provide ample evidence about the empires, the tendency to generalize in this fashion contributed to an inability to identify accurate evidence. Additionally, those students who did not address similarities and differences in the rise of empires and consequently did not utilize evidence of rise were unable to earn the 2 points for evidence.

In general, this year as in previous years, most students struggled with analysis. Occasionally students stumbled into analysis of a characteristic of an empire (e.g., the Mongols were a successful empire because of their military technology and strategy). Such analysis was insufficient, however, to earn a point because it did not address a comparison.

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?

- Pay particular attention to teaching students to attack the question before they begin writing their responses. Many students seemed to miss or ignore the word “rise” in the prompt and simply compared empires in a generic fashion, with no attention paid to comparisons of the rise of empires.
- Encourage students not only to read the prompt but also perhaps to rewrite it word-for-word as a starting point for their theses, or to circle key words in the prompt. This strategy encourages students to focus on what the prompt is asking them to address and is fundamentally useful for all learners.

- Continue to help students develop their analytical writing skills. Students are expected to analyze at least one of the comparisons they make. Teachers may want to practice this skill in isolation in the classroom to help prepare students to do this well on the exam.
- Employ strategies that encourage students to analyze comparisons. For example, have students create graphic organizers (Venn diagrams) each time they make comparisons, and encourage them to consider explanations of the similarities and differences. Teachers have a tacit knowledge about analyzing comparisons; the challenge many face is how to teach students this skill. Analysis is an enduring skill, and learning how to prepare students to think, read and write analytically should continue to be the focus of teacher professional development.
- Explore resources other than textbooks about the West African Sudanic empires. Unfortunately, many textbooks currently used in secondary schools include an uneven treatment of Ghana, Mali and Songhay. Some even present these empires in a way that may be supporting student misconceptions. Additional resources may need to be employed to support student learning about these empires and their distinctions.