



Student Performance Q&A: 2012 AP® Italian Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP® Italian Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Frank Nuessel of the University of Louisville in Kentucky. 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.

Task 1: E-mail Reply

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students reply to an e-mail message. Students were allotted 15 minutes to read the message and write the reply. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able first to comprehend the e-mail and then to write a reply using a formal form of address. The reply had to address all the questions and requests raised in the message, as well as ask for more details about something mentioned in the message.

The course theme for the e-mail reply task was *Vita contemporanea*, and the task required students to use the formal register to respond to two questions from the director of a summer school for adolescents. Students answered two questions: (1) What qualities do you possess that will allow you to share limited living quarters? and (2) What activities can you propose to the group during periods of relaxation? Finally, students had to ask for details about some aspect contained in the original e-mail.

How well did the students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 2.52 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.80.

* The Standard Group does not include students who hear or speak Italian at home or who have lived for one month or more in a country where Italian is the native language. Decisions about score distributions are based on the Standard Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students did not read the directions carefully and did not answer both questions embedded in the e-mail. Likewise, they did not seek details about the content of the original e-mail. Finally, some did not use the appropriate register.

Certain types of errors recurred:

- Students did not maintain an exchange appropriate to the task, writing off topic or not addressing both questions.
- Students did not address the prompt directly and completely, including its various components. Many did respond with sufficient elaboration and did not seek additional details from the writer of the e-mail.
- Some responses lacked comprehensibility, clarity of expression, and relevance to the topic and did not provide pertinent information.
- Lack of varied and appropriate vocabulary and idiomatic language often forced the reader to interpret the meaning of a phrase or sentence.
- Many responses lacked variety and accuracy in grammar, syntax, and usage, exhibiting excessive use of simple sentences (subject-verb-complement structures); errors in subject-verb or adjective-noun agreement; and forms that forced the reader to interpret the intended meaning.
- Students often used inappropriate register in a task that required the use of a formal form of address.
- There was sometimes little variety in the use of simple and compound sentences or complex structures (noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, comparative and superlative structures, and so forth).

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Students are already accustomed to responding to e-mails, but most of these involve interpersonal writing with friends in which the familiar register is used. This task, however, required the use of the formal register.

Teachers should do the following to help students improve their performance:

- Guide students through the task's instructions and ensure that they know all its requirements.
- Explain the scoring guidelines for the task.
- Prepare simulated e-mail reply writing tasks for periodic practice under actual exam conditions, and score these practice responses using the scoring guidelines.
- Employ the six overarching themes in the construction of this exercise.

Task 2: Persuasive Essay

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed writing in the presentational communicative mode by having students write a persuasive essay on a given topic while referencing three sources of information about the topic. Students were first allotted 6 minutes to read the essay topic and the two printed sources. Then they listened to the

one audio source. Afterward, they had 40 minutes to write the essay. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able first to comprehend the three sources and then to present their different viewpoints. They also had to present their own viewpoint and defend it thoroughly, using information from all the sources to support the essay. As they referred to the sources, they needed to identify them appropriately. Furthermore, the essay had to be organized into clear paragraphs.

The course theme for the persuasive essay task was *Vita contemporanea*, and the task concerned youth unemployment. It presented a written text about unemployed people from the ages of 15 to 24 in Italy who belong to a group called Neet (“Not in employment neither in education nor training”). It contained a map of the distribution of the Neet in Italy. Finally, an audio text presented a discussion of governmental actions and resources to help young people prepare for and find employment.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.49 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.70. Student performance on this task was not quite as good as on the e-mail reply. This may be due to the complexity of integrating the various elements of the task.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students were not prepared to write a persuasive essay with clarity and accuracy. The following are some of the common problems experienced by students:

- Students did not provide effective treatment within the context of the task, for example, not addressing all three sources while offering their own perspective.
- Students did not address the prompt directly and completely, including its various components.
- Students did not demonstrate an understanding of the distinct points of view and the information contained in each of the sources, with specific references to each one.
- Students did not integrate content from all three sources to support a thesis. They often cited or identified only one or two sources, with few specific details.
- Students did not clearly and coherently present their own viewpoint together with a persuasive argument and substantive examples.
- Essays were disorganized and lacked transitional elements and cohesive devices, such as the use of expressions to connect ideas and maintain a plausible line of reasoning.
- Some essays showed a lack of comprehensibility and a lack of clarity of expression.
- There was a lack of varied and rich vocabulary and idiomatic language; instead, students engaged in the repetitive use of elementary vocabulary and no idioms.
- There was a lack of accuracy and variety in grammar, syntax, and usage, including complex grammatical structures such as subordinate clauses and contrary-to-fact structures. There were also frequent errors in subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement.
- Many students did not develop their paragraphs using both simple and compound sentences.
- Students did not use appropriate register.
- Students did not cite sources or elaborate on the pertinence of the evidence being marshaled in support of an argument.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?

The presentational writing task may be unfamiliar to many students. It requires a careful integration of three distinct sources of information (written text, graphic, and audio) together with their own point of view. Responding to this task is complex and requires students to have some practice with authentic materials. The Teachers' Resources section of the AP Central® site offers a large number of such materials.

Students need practice in writing essays in which they have to refer to three separate sources as well as express their own opinion on a specific subject. It is important to tell students to carefully read and follow the instructions for this task and to read the question very carefully before beginning to write the essay. Students should also spend some time outlining their essay prior to writing it.

An emphasis on authentic material, defined as material produced by native speakers of Italian for native speakers of Italian, is evident in this task, which contains authentic text, graphic, and audio text. Teachers should introduce such materials so that students become familiar with them.

It would be helpful to refer students to both the student samples and the scoring guidelines posted on AP Central so that they can see actual examples of essays from the 2012 exam. Teachers should discuss the sample essays with students so that they have a clear idea of how scoring guidelines are applied.

Students need periodic in-class, timed practice in writing a persuasive essay that reflects the actual exam conditions. Students need to develop a sense of how much time it will take to write such an essay. They should develop a habit of giving their essays a final proofreading for common grammatical problem areas such as subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, use of subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling, use of transitional elements, staying on task, and use of paragraphs.

Task 3: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated oral conversation. Students were first allotted 1 minute to read a preview of the conversation, including an outline of each turn in the conversation. Then the conversation proceeded, including 20 seconds for students to speak at each of five turns in the conversation. The series of five responses received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. The responses had to appropriately address each turn in the conversation according to the outline as well as the simulated interlocutor's utterance.

The course theme for the conversation task was *Bellezza ed estetica*. For this task, students needed to respond to five audio prompts spoken by the student's friend Giulia.

1. Giulia asks if there are any plans to go to the Jovanotti concert next Saturday. She wants to know whether she and the student should go. Students had to respond with enthusiasm and comment on music.
2. Giulia is worried and makes a suggestion not to wait too long to purchase tickets, or there may be none left. Students had to agree and ask for details.
3. Giulia explains that tickets for students cost 20 euros and suggests that the student bring money to school the next morning so she can buy both of their tickets. She then asks what the student plans to wear. Students had to agree and respond.

4. Giulia asks how she and the student should get to the stadium on Saturday. Students had to offer a suggestion.
5. Giulia says good-bye and suggests that she and the student talk again before dinner. Students had to make a counterproposal and say good-bye.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.90 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.28. In statistical terms, students performed best on this task.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students need to engage in activities that promote the ability to respond to dialogic situations in a natural and appropriate fashion in line with the give-and-take of a speech event.

- Some students did not provide an exchange appropriate to the task.
- Students did not provide appropriate information, such as offering a viable suggestion for getting to the stadium.
- There was a lack of comprehensibility and clarity of expression.
- Students often used elementary vocabulary instead of varied and rich vocabulary and idiomatic language.
- There was a lack of accuracy and variety in grammar, syntax, and usage, including errors of agreement (subject-verb, noun-adjective), lack of subordinate clauses, incorrect usage, and errors in word order.
- Students often did not use appropriate register.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on the exam?

The following suggestions would be useful for teachers to implement to familiarize students with this task:

- Although students speak in class, they may not have practice in sustained dialogues, as this task requires. It would be useful to familiarize students with various types of speech interactions (greetings, responses to questions, queries for information, leave-taking, etc.).
- Students should read and listen very carefully the instructions on how to respond to the task.
- It is important that students practice this part of the exam with the equipment that will be used during the actual administration. Students should have practice responding to a series of five prompts, including ones that require them to initiate an exchange, such as by asking a question. Students need to develop a sense of how to respond in 20 seconds. This sort of practice needs to occur throughout the academic year.
- Students need to listen carefully to the prompt and say something relevant in response, even if what they say is brief.
- Students need to practice listening to a wide variety of male and female voices. Appropriate clips from various media would be useful in and out of the classroom. Many of these materials are easily accessible on the Internet, and AP Central has a list of links to audio materials.
- The speaking component in the classroom should not be solely focused on the conversation task. Rather, a variety of activities should be introduced into the curriculum, such as interviews and

debates. Students need to be prepared to respond spontaneously to different situations. This will also improve fluency and confidence in their own linguistic abilities. At the same time, instructors need to pay attention to teaching verb tenses, increasing vocabulary, and so forth. Successful self-correction of an error is always viewed favorably.

It is vital that student responses are recorded properly, regardless of whether cassettes or digital recordings are used. To ensure that this happens, teachers should take the following steps:

- Prior to the exam, work with school authorities and the proctor to ensure that there will be no distracting noises while students are recording.
- Since it is important to ensure that the proctor knows how to administer the speaking section of the exam, review the relevant guidelines with the proctor well in advance of the administration. Common problems include recording at the wrong speed, recording on the wrong track, and recordings being cut off in mid-response. A final equipment test just prior to the administration of the speaking section is a good practice.
- Remind students not to stop and start their machines while recording. Students should follow directions and start, pause, or stop the recorder only when told to do so; they should not pause or stop the recorder in between individual questions.

Task 4: Cultural Comparison

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed speaking in the presentational communicative mode by having students make a comparative oral presentation on a cultural topic. Students were allotted 4 minutes to read the topic and prepare the presentation and then 2 minutes to deliver the presentation. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. The presentation needed to compare the student's own community to an area of the Italian-speaking world, demonstrating understanding of cultural features of the Italian-speaking world. Furthermore, the presentation had to be organized clearly.

The course theme for the cultural comparison task was *Famiglia e società*. The task consisted of a question asking the student about the opinion of people in the student's community regarding the importance of living in a city. In their oral presentations, students compared that opinion with Italian attitudes toward the same topic with which they were familiar.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.47 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.73. Standard Group performance on this task was statistically the lowest of all four tasks, but the Total Group performed slightly better on this task than on the persuasive essay.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors or omissions included the following:

- Students did not provide an effective treatment of the topic within the context of the task.
- Students did not provide a clear comparison of their community with that of the target culture and did not offer supporting details and pertinent examples.
- Students did not demonstrate a complete understanding of the Italian context to which they were comparing their own culture.

- Students did not provide an organized presentation with a clear and orderly comparison of the two communities.
- Students were not able to verbalize a comprehensible response with ease and clarity of expression, instead providing a series of disjointed words, phrases, or expressions that lacked cohesion and clarity.
- Students did not provide an accurate response containing variety in grammar, syntax, and usage; frequent grammatical and syntactic errors made comprehension difficult.
- Students did not consistently employ the appropriate formal register.
- Students' lack of correct pronunciation, intonation, and pacing impeded comprehension.
- Students did not engage in successful self-correction or did not clarify their response to enhance comprehension. For example, when attempting to self-correct, they merely repeated an incorrect word or phrase.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them improve the performance of their students on this exam?

Students need to remember that they must address all aspects of this task by making clear comparisons with their community and one in the target culture and include accurate and appropriate examples. Likewise, linguistic aspects are important (pronunciation, intonation, pacing, register, grammar, syntax, usage, lexicon, and idiomatic expressions).

Teachers should be attentive to the following points:

- Instruct students to read and follow the instructions very carefully.
- Provide models of comparisons of home community with that of the target culture. This might include food, cities, transportation, and so forth.
- Provide actual timed testing situations based on exemplary test questions. The responses should be recorded, and those replies should be scored in accordance with the scoring guidelines.
- Help students become familiar with the equipment to be used during the administration of the actual exam.
- Expose students to as many authentic materials as possible. Devise out-of-class activities that involve exposure to authentic textual and audio materials.