



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

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP® German Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Johanna Watzinger-Tharp of the University of Utah. 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.

Specifically, within the theme of Families and Communities (*Familie und Gemeinschaft*), students were confronted with an e-mail that came to them after they had offered to volunteer at an elementary school. In this e-mail the school's principal asked the recipient to choose between working as a crossing guard or as an assistant in a swimming class. Using the formal address, students had to open their e-mail reply with a greeting and then respond to the question of which of the two tasks they would prefer ("*Welche dieser Aufgaben würden Sie lieber machen?*"). The e-mail also asked students to describe volunteer experiences they might have had in the past and invited them to offer their own ideas for volunteering. Students needed to conclude their e-mail with a formal closing.

How well did students perform on this task?

Students performed well on this interpersonal writing task. The mean score for the Standard Group* was 3.07 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.52. The majority of students were

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

able to open with an appropriately formal greeting, respond to most or all of the questions and requests, and end their e-mail reply with an appropriate closing.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some of the most common errors resulted from not attending to all task requirements, for example, not responding to all questions or requests or not asking for more details for a particular item in the e-mail prompt.

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?

Teachers should emphasize the two-part nature of this task: students must attend to the more generic task requirements while also responding to the specific content of the message. More generally, teachers should engage students in a variety of one-way and two-way writing tasks that require both formal and informal registers, deal with a variety of topics, and are based on authentic prompts. Students will also benefit from models of interpersonal writing, again both formal and informal, that expose them to writing conventions of the German-speaking world and to cultural elements embedded in them.

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.

Also within the theme of Families and Communities, the question for the persuasive essay involved when young adults should move out of their parents' home ("*Wann sollten junge Erwachsene von zu Hause ausziehen?*"). The print source (*Quellenmaterial 1*) presented the positive effects of living on one's own while also addressing challenges such as initial costs of securing an apartment. *Quellenmaterial 2*, a chart, showed the living arrangements of young adults in 2008, broken down by gender. It revealed, for example, the percentages of young men and women who were unmarried and lived with their parents, and the percentages of unmarried individuals who shared their living space with others. The audio (*Quellenmaterial 3*), to which students listened twice, focused on young adults and their reasons for living at home at the "Hotel Mama," thus presenting a viewpoint that differed from that of the print source. The audio interview addressed the financial issue but also the convenience of living with one's parents. It included comments from a student who lived at home and an interview with a sociologist who discussed the financial challenges of living on one's own as well as his personal experience at an earlier time.

How well did students perform on this task?

Overall students successfully completed this task. The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.11, and for the Total Group 3.55, out of 5 possible points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students did not necessarily cite all three sources, as stipulated in the English task directions, nor integrate them well, which is an element in the scoring guidelines. In fact, students' attempts at explicit citations more often led to awkward expressions than to an improvement of their essays. It should be noted that the German task directions differ from those in English: they ask students to use the information from the sources but do not explicitly say, as they do in English, that students must incorporate information from *all* the sources.

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?

Teachers should focus on skills that are required for producing high-quality research papers, such as citing sources properly, producing focused paragraphs, and developing a cohesive argument that features analysis, integration, and synthesis of sources as well as presentation of the student's own point of view. Students should also aim to gain content knowledge as well as learn linguistic features through the three sources they consult for their essay. In other words, students might enhance the quality of their essays by incorporating vocabulary and structures from the audio and especially the print text. Finally, students need to understand that the sources may sometimes present truly *opposing* opinions on a topic, but that in other cases they might merely present *different* aspects or facets of a situation.

More generally, but importantly, teachers should provide abundant opportunities for students to work with authentic audio, audiovisual, and print sources, including charts and graphs that might require not only interpreting but also compensating for missing information, or for information that may not be presented very effectively. Developing a critical attitude toward published material can and should become part of the course and will benefit students beyond development of their German language and culture skills.

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.

Within the theme of Contemporary Life (*Alltag*), the interlocutor (Peter) first stated that he had a problem with his car, to which the student was asked to reply by expressing willingness to help, and then by asking for more details on the car problem. The interlocutor then raised the question of how to get to school now that his car had broken down. The student was supposed to express sympathy (*Mitgefühl*) and to make a suggestion. Third, the interlocutor asked for advice on securing the funds to repair the car, to which the student was supposed to respond with some suggestions. Next the interlocutor shared his idea for earning money as a lifeguard and asked for a reaction to his parents' opinion that the job was too dangerous. The student needed to render an opinion and justify it. Finally the interlocutor asked about upcoming exams and suggested studying together, to which the student was supposed to respond with a specific suggestion for doing so.

How well did students perform on this task?

This task yielded the highest mean score of all four tasks, with 3.21 out of a possible 5 points for the Standard Group, and 3.73 for the Total Group. Most students successfully engaged in the conversation and were able to respond to the prompts while also following the conversation outline.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students did not always attend to the specific nature of the speaking turns, especially if a single turn involved two speech acts, for example, expressing sympathy and also making a suggestion. However, even if they did not perform all the speech acts stipulated in the overview, they were still able to keep the conversation going.

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?

Teachers should engage students in a variety of formal and informal interpersonal tasks, including face-to-face, remote, synchronous, and asynchronous tasks. Such interpersonal activities may include interviews with different interlocutors (other students, teacher, German speakers); phone conversations and messages; Internet chats; and the like. A familiarity with common speech acts and some formulaic expressions associated with them will also help students to engage successfully in interpersonal conversations. Speech acts that are part of everyday interactions include greetings and closings, asking for and giving advice, making suggestions, expressing sympathy, asking for information, providing elaboration and details, and agreeing or disagreeing. Students should also be made aware of cultural conventions and cross-cultural speech act differences — for example, frequency of expressing regret (“I am sorry”) and directness and indirectness (an imperative vs. a question to make a request). Here, too, the course can serve students beyond language acquisition by helping them develop cross-cultural awareness in their communication with speakers from other backgrounds.

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 German-speaking world, demonstrating understanding of cultural features of the German-speaking world. Furthermore, the presentation had to be organized clearly.

Within the theme of Beauty and Aesthetics, students were asked which events and activities in their community might be pertinent to young artists (“*Welche Veranstaltungen oder Aktivitäten in Ihrer Umgebung haben etwas mit jungen Künstlern zu tun?*”). In their oral presentations students had to compare perspectives on this question in their home community with those in a German-speaking region, and they were also invited to describe their own observations or experiences, or what they had learned in school.

How well did students perform on this task?

Students performed relatively well on the presentational speaking task, with a mean score of 2.51 for the Standard Group and 2.93 for the Total Group out of 5 possible points. However, the task yielded the lowest mean score of the four tasks.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A number of students did not respond to the specific topic prompt about activities and events that relate to artists but instead presented a general cultural comparison of their community and what they perceive as features of German-speaking communities. In alignment with the scoring guideline, students who did not treat the specific topic at all received a score of 0. Students who provided this kind of unacceptably general comparison ranged from linguistically weak to strong students, including heritage and native speakers.

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 must first understand the generic nature of the task, which will be repeated each year: a cultural comparison of the students' perspectives on their own community and perspectives of the German-speaking world. Second, teachers should provide opportunities for students to discuss specific issues that lend themselves to a cultural comparison, for example, nutrition, leisure time, diversity, education, child rearing, and political engagement. The cultural comparison also provides an opportunity to critically examine stereotypes and to guide students toward a nuanced understanding of their own culture and that of the target language.

In addition, students need to be aware of ways in which the audience, context, and setting determine the register of a presentation. Oral presentations in the course should include the cultural comparison task specific to the exam, but also other contexts that are pertinent to students' current and future experiences. For example, students might give presentations to earn a scholarship; to get elected to an office in their school; or to convince others of a social or political cause. Students will be better prepared to succeed in this task if they have performed various types of presentational speaking throughout their courses.