



Student Performance Q&A: 2012 AP® Psychology Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP® Psychology were written by the Chief Reader, Ken Keith of the University of San Diego. 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 required students to apply psychological concepts to a scenario in which a prospective college student, Annabelle, chooses which school to apply to and how she might adapt to college life. Part A required students to explain the psychological concepts in the context of Annabelle's decision making and choices about college. This portion of the question assessed students' understanding of how information concerning potential schools that comes most readily to mind, explicit demands from external forces, the information-processing brain center, and memory for planned future events could relate to Annabelle's choice of schools. Part A evaluated students' comprehension of how a specific problem-solving strategy (the availability heuristic), social influence, cognitive or affective processes related to the prefrontal cortex, and prospective memory affect an individual's decision-making abilities.

Part B asked students to explain how three psychological concepts might be related to how well Annabelle adapts as she begins her college career. Students needed to address how agoraphobic fears could either inhibit or facilitate Annabelle's engagement in college life. Students then had to demonstrate how Annabelle's acquired knowledge, or crystallized intelligence, might affect her ability to adapt to college. They were also required to explain how Annabelle's beliefs in her own cultural superiority, or an emerging understanding of ethnic groups different from her own, could affect her ability to adapt to college life. Thus part B assessed how abnormal behavior, intelligence, and social factors influence this experience.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.25 out of a possible 7 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors were associated with the points reflecting knowledge of concepts related to memory.

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?

Although continued focus on the use of psychological terminology in the formulation of answers remains important, teachers should also be encouraged to foster student ability to apply psychological principles to various problems and scenarios.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to communicate their knowledge of several psychological concepts by addressing, in a list of paired items, how the placement or location of the first element influences an outcome related to the second element. Specifically, students were required to demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the following: (1) the rods in the eye and peripheral vision, (2) a cognitive strategy tied to word recall, (3) serotonin in the brain or in a neuron-related structure and the reduction of depression, (4) retinal disparity and depth perception, (5) the motor cortex in the brain and body movement, (6) a psychological concept related to the influence of the presence of others on performance, and (7) the effect of proximity on perception.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.66 out of a possible 7 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often correctly identified the process but did not specify the location or placement of the associated term. The fact that some of the “locations” were implicit or hypothetical made the question challenging for some students.

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?

This question required a relatively high level of conceptual and critical thought. Teachers would do well to focus on applications and synthesis of ideas, not just terminology.