



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

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP® Spanish Literature were written by the Chief Reader, Hazel Gold of Emory University in Atlanta. 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 assessed students' ability to write an essay analyzing the way in which a given theme is treated in a poem that is not on the required reading list for the course. On this year's exam, the selection for the poetry analysis question was "Contra las canciones de opósitos," a two-stanza, 17-verse poem by Luis Alberto de Cuenca. Students were asked to analyze the relationship of the poetic voice to the opposing concepts presented in the poem and to analyze how the poet integrates poetic language and devices with this theme.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for content for the Standard Group* was 5.36 out of 9 possible points. For the Total Group, the mean score for content was 4.98. The mean score for language for the Standard Group was 3.83 out of 5 possible points. The mean language score for the Total Group was 3.96.

The text that appeared on this question was distinguished by straightforward syntax and everyday vocabulary yet also was characterized by a richness of poetic language and devices. In "Contra las canciones de opósitos," the poetic voice confronts the tensions created by having to reconcile opposing concepts that ought to be distinct from each other but have become inextricably commingled: good and evil, love and hatred, pleasure and pain, summer's heat and winter's cold. The theme of the poem — the relationship of the poetic voice to these opposing concepts — proved accessible to students with differing levels of analytical ability.

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

The question directed students to analyze as well the integration of poetic language and devices with the poem's theme. In the best responses students identified many examples of rhetorical figures (including hyperbole, paradox, contrast/antithesis, images, parallelism, anaphora, and enumeration) and analyzed how Cuenca uses them to communicate this theme. They also pointed to abundant examples of poetic language that convey this theme: polysyndeton and enjambment; vocabulary that underscores the antithetical nature of the concepts the poet addresses (binarisms such as "*bien /mal*," "*amiga/enemiga*," "*risa/llanto*," "*sol/sombra*," "*oceano/desierto*," "*paz/guerra*"); and a poetic tone that is confessional, argumentative, and nostalgic by turns.

The best responses were distinguished by nuanced critical interpretation supported by incisive analysis. These essays discussed the tedium experienced by the poetic voice whose effort to reconcile opposing concepts is one of long standing ("*Me he pasado la vida ...*"). They noted that Cuenca presents this confusion of opposites not only at the conceptual level but even at the level of language, as seen in the alliterative similarities between words such as "*fiesta*" and "*fastidio*" or "*amiga*" and "*enemiga*." The best responses analyzed the poem's division into two parts: in verses 1–7 the poetic voice reflects on a life in which pleasure and pain, friends and enemies, have become indistinguishable; in verses 8–17 the poetic voice announces a break with the status quo ("*Pero esto se acabó*") and expresses the desire to return to a simpler age when language communicated only absolutes ("*palabras únicas, distintas, inequívocas*") and words indeed corresponded to experience rather than falsifying it with the "*doble cara de un mismo aburrimiento*." They referred to the poet's determination in the second part of the poem ("*Quiero ... no quiero*") to live a life replete with meaning that has not been undermined by the relativism that equates opposing concepts, linking this decision with the manifesto expressed by the poem's title, "Contra las canciones de opósitos."

As an example of the interconnection of form and content, some students insightfully discussed how the absence of rhyme exemplifies the chaos of indifferentiation that the poetic voice protests; others viewed the poem's use of fixed meter (alexandrines) as an attempt to impose order and conceptual boundaries. Some of the most perceptive essays viewed the final verse — "*Ya no quiero sudar rodeado de pingüinos*" — in an ironic light, noting that the poetic voice falls prey to the same amalgamation of opposing concepts that is criticized throughout the rest of the poem, thereby categorizing the desired world of absolutes as an unattainable utopia.

Students whose essays suggested (but did not demonstrate) competence tended to paraphrase the poem rather than analyze it or had difficulty connecting poetic form with content. In many instances they referred only to the poem's presentation of opposing concepts but never mentioned the relationship of the poetic voice with them. The weakest responses did not address the theme or else generalized about human experiences of love and hate or pleasure and sorrow without ever relating their comments to the poem itself. Often they demonstrated a lack of understanding of the poem and were unable to integrate the discussion (if any) of poetic language and devices into an analysis of the poem's theme.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors and omissions included the following:

- Paraphrasing or describing the poem in lieu of analyzing it
- Discussing ideas mentioned in the poem (nature, the passage of time, love and friendship, war, etc.), or expressing personal opinions, without focusing on the question or the poem itself
- Not addressing all elements of the question; for instance, limiting the discussion to the opposing concepts in the poem, without analyzing the relationship of the poetic voice to these concepts
- Citing examples of poetic language or listing/defining poetic devices found in the poem without analyzing how they are integrated with the poem's theme

- Not including specific textual references
- Not mentioning form as related to the poem's content
- Confusing the poetic voice (a literary construct that embodies the speaker in the poem) with the real-life creator of the text, Luis Alberto de Cuenca
- Demonstrating poor organization or limited ability to write a well-developed essay

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?

The poetry question appears on the AP Spanish Literature Exam every year, and it always features a poem that does not come from the required reading list. The advantage for students is having the text in front of them while they consider, plan, and write their response. Reading new poems and practicing ways to respond to the same type of prompt under the same conditions and constraints as those of the AP Exam will help students to refine their skills and become better equipped to write a well-developed and organized treatment of the question.

Teachers can further help by encouraging students to set aside time to read the question carefully and then to read the poem thoroughly, keeping the question in mind. Teachers can suggest that students underline or circle the important parts of the question — in this case, the relationship of the poetic voice to the opposing concepts presented in the poem, how the poetic devices and language are integrated with this theme, and the need for specific supporting examples from the poem itself. This type of exercise trains students to remember to fully address the question. Teaching students to take a few minutes to outline their responses and to reserve some time for proofreading, editing, and correcting elements of their work is another valuable practice.

Throughout the AP Spanish Literature course, teachers can help their students by doing the following:

- Involving the class in small-group work or, in a prewriting phase, having students share their thoughts concerning a poem's theme, form, and the poetic language and devices employed
- Working regularly with students on literary vocabulary, such as the various rhetorical devices or figures of speech and rhyme and meter
- Teaching students how to better identify poetic devices and their effects
- Encouraging students to write more than one draft of an essay on any given poem
- Making peer review among students part of the editing process

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

Two types of thematic analysis questions are possible: The first is an analysis of a given theme or topic in one work from the reading list; the second involves the comparison of a given theme or topic in two works from the required reading list. This question was of the former type. Students were asked to write an essay analyzing the theme of *engaño* in one work chosen from a list of four titles: the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes*, Julia de Burgos's "A Julia de Burgos," Miguel de Unamuno's *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*, and Sergio Vodanovic's *El delantal blanco*. As a theme *engaño* encompasses many related concepts: deceit, deception, lies, trickery, cheating, false appearances, fraud, social hypocrisy, and dissimulation.

How well did students perform on this question?

For the Standard Group the mean content score was 4.96 out of a possible 9 points. The mean content score for the Total Group was 4.82. The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.65 out of a possible 5 points. The mean language score for the Total Group was 4.01.

Because this year's question required students to discuss a single work chosen from a list of four, the range of available options was quite broad. Each work offered clear examples of characters who are perpetrators or victims of *engaño* in specific social contexts. Of the four options, "A Julia de Burgos" was used least, perhaps because the task required students to have a strong recall of a poem (as opposed to a narrative or dramatic text with a plot). The theme of *engaño* in "A Julia de Burgos" is communicated through specific uses of poetic language, devices, and form; this may have posed a challenge for students to discuss — and to do so with the required degree of rigor and explicitness — without having the text in front of them. *Lazarillo de Tormes* was the text most frequently selected by students to answer this question, although in many essays plot summary predominated over analysis. The greatest difficulty with producing an analysis of the theme was observed in responses based on *El delantal blanco*, many of which offered mistaken interpretations of how *engaño* functions in Vodanovic's work.

In their take on this question, students who used *Lazarillo de Tormes* focused principally on *engaño* as the key element in the novel's structure as *Bildungsroman*. They showed how the protagonist is himself deceived and consequently learns to deceive others. After observing examples of deceitful or criminal behavior by his own parents and then being subjected to the the trickery of his first master, the blind man, Lazarillo in turn becomes an expert in perpetrating fraud and deception, not merely to survive while in the employ of his subsequent masters but also to arrive at the economically comfortable but morally compromised position he occupies at the conclusion of the novel. In superior responses, students noted that Lazarillo is an unreliable narrator, hence his self-serving retelling of his life story extends this deception to the novel's narratee ("Vuestra Merced") and, ultimately, the reader. Often they observed that because the fraudulent or criminal behavior engaged in by Lazarillo and others — cheating, theft, lying, false appearances, and prostitution — is sanctioned by both the nobility and the Church, the author uses the theme of *engaño* to create a biting social satire of 16th-century Spain.

Similarly, *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* provided ample material for discussion: Capable students analyzed how Manuel is a "piadoso fraude," a priest who deceives his flock by keeping from them the truth about his lack of belief in God or an immortal soul in order not to destroy their faith. They also referred to the examples of Ángela and her brother Lázaro, who become complicit with Manuel's secret and continue his deception, even going so far in Lázaro's case as to take what is a sacrilegious communion just to maintain the illusion of belief in front of the townspeople. Some of these responses offered perceptive analyses of Unamuno's implication that religion itself is an *engaño* necessary to the adequate functioning of society; they discussed the pros and cons of Manuel's dual role as martyr and hypocrite and connected his equivocal position with Unamuno's use of imagery, specifically, the illusory reflection of the mountain in the lake.

Those students who discussed Vodanovic's play approached the theme from the angle of society's tendency to judge people based on (false) appearances, showing how a mere change of clothing fools onlookers who discern differences based exclusively on social roles. The most analytical of these essays based on *El delantal blanco* pointed out that the playwright portrays money and social class as inherently deceptive concepts that negatively affect society, leading to the mistaken belief of *la Señora* that she innately personifies good taste and high social standing, and contributing to the maid's willful appropriation of her mistress's clothing and social position because of her dissatisfaction with her own lot in life.

Finally, essays that analyzed the theme of *engaño* in "A Julia de Burgos" emphasized the poetic voice's split between a *yo* and a *tú*, an authentic, inner self described as all intellect and heart versus a shallow

public self that covers itself with the mask of respectability, conforming to norms of feminine beauty (makeup, clothing) to win social acceptance. A number of these essays astutely noted that Burgos's poem is not simply a condemnation of patriarchy; rather, the poet accepts this kind of hypocrisy as necessary even while despising herself for being complicit with it.

Whatever the work that was chosen, the strongest essays relied on appropriate textual examples to explore the ways in which *engaño* is depicted, either as an act that an individual deliberately commits in his or her interactions with others or, alternatively, as a pathological and false belief about oneself or the world, a form of delusional thinking. Students who misinterpreted the theme in the selected work produced more limited responses, as did those whose essays were characterized by an overreliance on plot summary or a prepared overview. Students who demonstrated unfamiliarity with the chosen work produced some of the weakest essays.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors and omissions included the following:

- Inability to deal with the theme of *engaño* in the chosen work
- Superficial development of the theme
- Excessive plot summary and minimal analysis
- Insufficient supporting examples from the chosen work
- General or vague responses that suggested students were not familiar with the work
- Superfluous or erroneous statements
- Not following the instructions to focus on analysis of a single work and instead writing a comparison of two texts
- Poor organization or limited ability to write a well-developed essay

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?

A successful response to the thematic analysis question begins with a careful reading of the question itself and continues with an answer that fully treats the topic — in this case, the theme of *engaño* — with supporting textual references. The best essays contain specific examples to support the students' ideas, and the ideas are presented in a systematic, explicit, and logical manner. The thematic analysis may entail either discussion of a single work or a comparison of two works. When answering this question, therefore, students must clearly state which work(s) they are treating and limit their response to those works, as stipulated by the instructions for the question.

Teachers need to remind students of the importance of reading all the works on the required reading list. In addition, teachers can help their students achieve good essay scores by doing the following:

- Giving students in-class writing practice with all aspects of essay composition: prewriting, outlining, writing, editing, and proofreading
- Asking students to act as editors of their own essays, an exercise that can help them recognize problems in their work and refine their essay-writing skills
- Helping students learn to stay focused on the topic by routinely pointing out content in their essays that is superfluous or irrelevant to the subject

- Teaching students to distinguish analysis from mere paraphrasing and plot summary
- Teaching students how to develop and properly support their ideas in the analysis at hand

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The text analysis question has two possible variations: One involves an analysis of a critical commentary about one work from the required reading list; the other is the analysis of an excerpt from a work on the reading list with two separate questions to answer. When the question is based on a critical commentary, students must present their analysis in the form of an essay; when the question is based on a textual fragment from a literary work, two shorter responses are required. This question was of the latter type. It was based on an excerpt from Carlos Fuentes's story *Chac Mool*. In part (a) students were asked to analyze the relationship between the narrator and Chac Mool in the textual fragment. In part (b) students were asked to explain the changes experienced by Chac Mool in his process of humanization, referring to both the textual fragment and the rest of the story.

How well did students perform on this question?

For the Standard Group, the mean content score was 5.38 out of a possible 10 points. The mean content score for the Total Group was 5.28. The mean language score for the Standard Group was 3.20 out of a possible 5 points. For the Total Group, the mean language score was 3.54.

The best responses for part (a) clearly analyzed the relationship between the narrator and Chac Mool in the textual fragment included on the exam, explaining it as a relationship of mutual dependence that is in the process of deteriorating. On the one hand, they discussed the many emotions and reactions that the narrator displays in the passage: horror provoked by his contact with Chac Mool's icy arms and scaly skin; fear and anger over Chac Mool's increasing power; pleasure in their earlier "*intermedios amables*" of storytelling and regret that these interludes no longer take place; surprise at the changes taking place in Chac Mool and the worsening of their relationship; hope that he may eventually be freed from Chac Mool's domination if the latter proves to be mortal. On the other hand, they also explicitly addressed Chac Mool's growing autonomy and the increasing number of demands he places on the narrator. In their responses, the most capable students observed the inversion of roles between the two (master/prisoner or adult/child). Some insightfully viewed this inversion as a dramatization of a centuries-old historical resentment: An indigenous subject from pre-Columbian civilization takes vengeance on a representative of the Western colonizing power that sought to destroy that culture. Less successful responses paraphrased or summarized the content of the passage in lieu of providing textual analysis or else spoke about aspects of the relationship between the narrator and Chac Mool without referring specifically to the passage.

When answering part (b), the most capable students offered clear explanations of the changes that Chac Mool undergoes in the process of humanization, and they supported their responses with appropriate examples taken from the cited passage as well as from the rest of the story. They referred not solely to the physical changes that the statue experiences in its transformation from painted stone to living flesh but also to psychological or even metaphysical changes. Chac Mool, they observed, becomes violent and demanding, and may be implicated in Filiberto's death; he acquires a taste for sensual pleasures; he is no longer an immortal deity but a potentially vulnerable mortal being; his appearance when Pepe encounters him in Filiberto's house at the end of the story suggests that despite his adversarial relationship to Western culture he is no longer immune to its seductions. Students who did not adequately understand the story or had not read this work in its entirety were unable to address part (b) competently.

Overall, there were fewer blank responses for part (a) than part (b). Based on the cited passage, students with analytical ability could produce an acceptable answer to the former, even if they had not read (or read well) Fuentes's story. Of course, this was not possible in part (b), which required knowledge of the entire story.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors and omissions included the following:

- Paraphrasing or summarizing the cited passage instead of textual analysis
- Not referring specifically to the passage
- Demonstrating an inadequate understanding of the cited passage or the story, or both
- Providing insufficient examples from the cited passage to support the analysis
- Offering general or vague responses that suggested an unfamiliarity with the story
- Making superfluous or erroneous statements
- Confusing the narrator of the story with the real-life author, Carlos Fuentes
- Relying on a prepared overview of "Chac Mool" or Carlos Fuentes, with limited connection to either part of the question
- Not following the instructions to write a separate response for parts (a) and (b), and instead combining the answers in a single response
- Poor organization or limited ability to write a focused response

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?

In addition to the suggestions given above to help students better prepare for and perform on the poetry analysis and thematic analysis questions, teachers might also do the following:

- Give students two-part questions based on a number of texts on the required reading list, to provide them with the experience of doing this type of excerpt analysis; and at some point or points during the year, have students answer this type of question under conditions and time constraints that are similar to those of the AP Spanish Literature Exam.
- Remind students to read and follow the directions carefully (that is, to write two separate responses and label each one).
- Encourage students to highlight or circle important words or concepts in the questions.
- Review with students the differences in the tasks that may appear in these questions ("*analiza*," "*explica*," "*describe*," "*comenta*," etc.).
- Teach students how to write effective thesis statements and conclusions.
- Help students develop and practice a list of vocabulary, expressions, and transitional phrases so that they will learn how to link sentences and paragraphs while integrating comments of an analytical nature, as opposed to writing anecdotal commentaries.

Because the text analysis question can be based on any work on the reading list, it is essential that students read each work completely. Teachers can further assist students by showing them how to do a

close reading of all the works, including consideration of vocabulary and linguistic and stylistic features, regardless of the genre.