



Student Performance Q&A: 2012 AP[®] United States History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP[®] United States History were written by the Chief Reader, Ernest Freeberg of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. 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?

The document-based question asked students to analyze the impact of big business on the economy and politics of the United States and the responses of Americans to those changes between 1870 and 1900. The question presented students with a number of different options for topics that could be discussed.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.70 out of a possible 9 points.

Students performed better than in past years on the document-based question. Students generally used a wide range of the documents, and no one document was consistently misused or misinterpreted. Students seemed to have some knowledge of specific factual information from the period.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker essays tended to string together long direct quotes from the documents, which interrupted the flow of the essay. Many essays tended to be descriptive rather than analytical in nature, dumping factual information without using it to support their thesis or answer the question. Students continue to have chronological sequencing problems, frequently bringing in outside information from outside 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?

As emphasized in the past two years, students should be encouraged to synthesize the information that is in the documents rather than paraphrasing or quoting the documents. Long quotes interrupt the flow of

the essay. Instead of telling what is in a document, students should use the main idea of the document to support their thesis.

Continued emphasis needs to be placed on using the documents as cues to trigger outside information, but the outside information should be confined to the time parameters of the question. Students should also be trained to focus on directly answering the question and explicitly addressing each component of the question. Too often students simply wrote a descriptive narrative of what they knew rather than using the information to directly answer the question.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question expected students to be able to connect political and economic changes of the revolutionary period with military conflict between the French and the British by analyzing the effects of the French and Indian War on the colonial relationship. Many responses were organized around the idea that the war changed the British view of the colonists and vice versa, and around issues such as the cost of the war, the debt that resulted from the war, and the stationing of troops in the colonies, which resulted in British actions that fostered considerable tensions with the colonies. The intent of the question was to show change in the relationship over time.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.73 out of a possible 9 points.

The question was straightforward and produced stronger essays than in previous years. Even the weakest essays often contained specific relevant evidence. Evidence was not always analyzed, however, and that distinguished the weaker essays from the stronger ones.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had problems with the sequencing of events. Chronological problems often produced analytical confusion. For example, students often argued the Boston Massacre precipitated the American Revolution, a mistake they would not have made if they had better chronological understanding.

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 should be advised to read, read, read: More reading leads to better writing. Educators should stress analytical writing as much as possible. The best answers contain substantial content that supports an analytical framework. Teachers also must emphasize that handwriting matters; it is difficult to score essays whose legibility makes them hard to read.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze how western expansion contributed to growing sectional tensions between North and South in the period 1800–1850. It required students to discuss the people, places, and events that were involved with western expansion during this period and to show how western expansion

contributed to the growing tensions between North and South. The question tested the historical thinking skills of cause and effect, chronological reasoning, and change over time.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.57 out of a possible 9 points.

More than half the students chose to answer this question, as it allowed them to demonstrate their knowledge of an important mainstream historical period and connect two topics of high interest — western expansion and sectional tensions. Students who understood the intent of the question did fairly well. Students who did not understand the intent of the question or who responded in a way that was different from what the question intended did poorly. Some students, instead of addressing the question, wrote essays about slavery, the issue of slavery causing tensions, or reasons for United States expansion into the new territories.

Students who wrote strong essays discussed the cause-and-effect relationship between western expansion and growing sectional tensions that occurred between Thomas Jefferson's election and the passage of the Compromise of 1850. They exhibited chronological reasoning, provided analysis throughout their essays, and supported their arguments with relevant historical evidence, such as the Louisiana Purchase, the Missouri Compromise, Manifest Destiny, the Mexican-American War, and the Compromise of 1850. Even students who wrote essays at the lower end of the scoring scale tended to include some relevant historical information, although they often overlooked both the Mexican-American War and the Wilmot Proviso and confused the order of events. Weaker responses sometimes confused the Compromises of 1820 and 1850, did not show how these compromises contributed to sectional tension, or wrote almost entirely about the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which was outside the time period.

What separated the higher-scoring essays from the lower-scoring essays was students' use of analysis. Many essays had adequate thesis statements, with students tying slavery to expansion as a reason for the tension, but the thesis may have been unfocused or only partially developed. Some essays were simply narratives, not linking western expansion to growing sectional tensions. Essays that made the connection, explaining how western expansion caused sectional tensions and providing relevant historical evidence to support their arguments, earned higher scores.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students who did not read the question carefully often did not make the connection between western expansion and growing sectional tensions. When students used the Louisiana Purchase, American Indian removal, and Manifest Destiny, these terms were often cited to set the stage for the essays and not as examples of events that caused sectional tensions.

Some students wrote narrative, rather than analytical, essays about the time period and did not show how western expansion led to growing sectional tensions between North and South. They included historical information that was within the time period but did not use the information to support and develop their thesis statements.

Sometimes students did not discuss the entire time period and instead focused only on one part of the time period. Regarding western expansion, they often overlooked the annexation of Texas, the Mexican-American War, and the acquisition of the Oregon Territory.

Some students demonstrated a lack of understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship of events that affected growing sectional tensions between 1800 and 1850, writing about people and events that were outside the time period. The events often included the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (sometimes discussed after the Compromise of 1850 and at other times confused with the Compromise of 1850), the

Dred Scott decision, and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, discussed in ways that were not linked to events within the period.

Some students confused the 36° 30' Missouri Compromise line with the Mason Dixon Line and used the terms interchangeably. Many students did not realize that the Missouri Compromise applied only to the territory of the Louisiana Purchase and not to later territorial acquisitions.

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 remind students of the importance of chronological reasoning as a tool for understanding United States history. Students knew events, but they did not always know how one event was linked to another. Sometimes they simply saw the events of the period as a series of happenings that occurred in isolation and often not in correct order. When preparing lessons on the time period from 1800 to 1850, help students understand the importance of cause and effect. When teaching about western expansion, help students link examples of western expansion to the growth of sectional tensions between North and South.

Students should be taught how to read and scrutinize an essay question, address all parts of the question, and link historical information from the time period of the question to what the question is asking them to do (analysis). Analysis should be integrated throughout the essay, not limited to the thesis and the conclusion. In addition, teachers should teach what it means not only to write a thesis but also to fully develop the thesis within the essay. Remind students that essays that contain a clear, well-developed thesis that addresses all parts of the question, effective analysis of the topic, and substantial, relevant historical information will earn high scores.

Teachers should help students to recognize cause-and-effect questions and determine the nature of the connections they must make in order to answer the question. In this question students had to show how western expansion caused growing sectional tensions between North and South. Students could not change the question to simply cite examples of western expansion or examples of sectionalism. In addition, teachers should help students to recognize change over time and consider whether events relating to western expansion lessened or exacerbated sectional tensions over the time frame of this essay: 1800 to 1850.

Teachers should demonstrate to students that history is not about memorizing dates, but rather about understanding the importance of key pivotal events or turning points, part of the historical thinking skill of periodization. Before students begin to answer an essay question that asks them to confine their answers to a particular time frame, encourage them to think about the significance of those dates as turning points. In this essay students might have connected 1800 with the election of Thomas Jefferson (the revolution of 1800) and the symbolic start of the transfer of power from Federalists to Democratic-Republicans. The date 1850 might have triggered the Compromise of 1850, which, rather than solving sectional tensions, seemed to create more rancor between North and South.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze the origins and outcomes of the intense cultural conflicts of the 1920s by focusing on two of three issues: immigration, prohibition, and religion. Although students needed to reference information related to the topics chosen, the question asked them to analyze cultural conflict(s) illustrated by the issues rather than to describe the issues themselves.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.95 out of a possible 9 points.

Because 72 percent of the students chose this question, there was a wide range of answers. Better essays identified and analyzed the cultural conflicts related to two issues; weaker essays tended to simply describe the origins and outcomes of each issue. Some students implied cultural conflict through the choice and arrangement of historical evidence. For example, a student may have pointed out that Congress designed the Immigration Act of 1924 to address the failure of the 1921 Emergency Quota Act to restrict southern and eastern European immigrants and to favor northern and western European immigrants. This suggests bias against particular ethnic groups and conflict over whom society considered an American. Smuggling of illegal alcohol and bribing of police suggested conflict over national prohibition policy. Resentment by fundamentalists of “sinful” culture suggested conflict over religion and society.

Most essays focused on two issues (most students chose prohibition and immigration), although occasionally essays focused only on one issue. The treatment of origins and outcomes was often uneven (students wrote more about one than the other). Students structured their essays in different ways. Most organized their essays by issue and then analyzed origins and outcomes of the cultural conflict(s) within each issue. Others organized their essays by origins of conflicts for two issues and then outcomes for two issues. Regarding the origins of cultural conflicts related to all three issues, some students traced the origins back into the nineteenth century, which was acceptable depending on how the student related the information to the question. Students tended to confine their answers to the 1920s regarding outcomes of the cultural conflicts.

Common historical information found on the topics included old versus new immigrants, immigration restriction through quota legislation, Bolshevik Revolution, socialism, Red Scare, Ku Klux Klan, Sacco and Vanzetti, temperance movement, 18th and 21st Amendments, Volstead Act, influence of the First World War, moral reform of the family and society, wets versus dries, bootlegging, increase of crime, speakeasies, modernist culture, religious fundamentalism, the Scopes trial, rural versus small-town America, modernism, and new values versus traditional values. Sometimes students used the same historical information to analyze both origins and outcomes. For example, students treated the rebirth and then growth of the Ku Klux Klan as both an origin and outcome of cultural conflict related to all three issues.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students described the origins and outcomes of two issues rather than analyzing the origins and outcomes of the intense cultural conflicts of the 1920s as related to two issues. Students did not always explicitly identify the cultural conflicts related to the two issues.

Some students described two issues rather than analyzing cultural conflicts through those issues. Also, some students confused the chronology of the relevant information.

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 encourage the development of analytical thinking. In this question students had to think about how and why cultural conflict was evident in two issues. Teachers should emphasize analysis rather than recitation of factual information. Teachers can reinforce analytical and writing skills through explicit instruction in writing essays that answer historical questions and require analysis.

Students should be prompted to identify the tasks of the question (analyze) and key words and phrases (origins and outcomes of cultural conflicts) in order to better focus on exactly what the question is asking them to do.

Teachers should emphasize chronological understanding along with cause and effect. They should also stress the importance of writing a clear thesis that explicitly answers the question. Encourage students to choose the essay about which they know the most historical information, and remind them to read the question and answer the question asked.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to compare and contrast the Cold War policies of two of three presidential administrations (Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and Richard Nixon). The intent of the question was not only to determine students' knowledge of the Cold War foreign policies of each of their selected presidents within the designated years but also to explore the strategic similarities and differences between the administrations, demonstrating change over time regarding presidential Cold War foreign policy. The question was straightforward and specific. Supporting the comparative argument that the prompt demanded encouraged students to take a broad view of the Cold War as well as to demonstrate their understanding of the specific Cold War foreign policies of the individual presidents and to provide relevant historical information in support of their essay. Because students could not use the administrations of John Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson, they were forced to forgo discussion of the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the height of the Vietnam War (1961–1969) — all areas very familiar to them.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.00 out of a possible 9 points.

Students performed at extraordinarily high levels on this question. This may be attributed in part to the fact that the material was relatively fresh from their classroom experience, but it is more likely a reflection of other factors, including the wording of the question, which elicited clear essay structure and lucid analysis.

Overall, student essays were stronger than those seen in past years. There were very few essays that appeared to have little or no grasp of what the question was asking. Additionally, because the question was so straightforward, very few students struggled with structuring their response. The better essays presented high-level nuances that intertwined with high-level analysis to show the student understood the Cold War time period and the fine differences between the two presidents and the time in which they guided Cold War policies. By asking for comparison while leaving out the administrations of Kennedy and Johnson, the question gave students the opportunity to examine the Cold War in this longitudinal fashion.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Perhaps the most common error was to omit either relevant historical information or sufficient analysis in the comparison of the two presidents' policies. Students also tended to oversimplify the complex policies of these Cold War presidents. For example, in an effort to draw a clear contrast between Truman or Eisenhower and Nixon, students often portrayed Eisenhower as a warmonger and used the policy of brinkmanship to prove this contention, missing the opportunity to note that Eisenhower effectively brought an end to the fighting in Korea. Likewise, students often portrayed Nixon as a dovish peacemaker who sought diplomatic solutions to the Cold War through table tennis and dinners with Mao and Brezhnev, ignoring the Christmas bombing campaign or the invasion of Cambodia and Laos.

Conceptually, many teachers appear to frame Nixon as a strong foreign policy president and a weaker domestic policy president. This may have led many students to inflate Nixon's successes. At times there was clear confusion between Truman/Eisenhower/Nixon and Kennedy/Johnson (e.g., Nixon as president during the Tet offensive; Eisenhower as president at the beginning of the Korean War, the Bay of Pigs operation, or the Cuban missile crisis). Essays often conflated the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.

Many students knew facts of the time period but did not compare and contrast or did so on a superficial basis. Other students tried to compare the presidents' policies but did not provide sufficient relevant historical details as to what those policies were. Good responses not only appropriately compared and contrasted the selected presidents but also included specific, relevant historical information. The presence of both was necessary to successfully respond to this question. Most frequently, students identified containment as the commonality between the presidents, which, although not incorrect in the most general sense, oversimplifies the complexity of the presidents' Cold War policies.

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 Cold War should be taught as a singular event with an overarching, consistent strategy (containment) with shifting tactics (e.g., brinkmanship versus détente) that were subject to context and administrative interests.

Students need to more fully understand concepts of compare and contrast and realize the importance of chronology in seeing change over time. They should be taught that "compare and contrast" is asking for similarities and differences. Teachers should specifically use compare and contrast in teaching presentations and student assignments to ground students in the process.

Students should be cautioned against making broad generalizations with little or no historical information to back up those assertions. Teachers should emphasize that students need to substantiate each assertion they make with specific *relevant* historical evidence or information.

Students should do more than simply have a fact-based knowledge of history; they should know how to write a convincing, analytical essay. Responses should answer the question that is asked and should be well-organized, with a clear thesis at the beginning and the correct usage of thematic paragraphs.

Students should have plenty of practice on writing multiple essays to learn how to budget their time.