



Student Performance Q&A: 2015 AP[®] European History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP[®] European History were written by the Chief Reader, Paul Deslandes of the University of Vermont. 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

Analyze changing conceptions of French national identity and culture in the period since 1960.

What was the intent of this question?

The document-based question (DBQ) was designed to evaluate the degree to which students could analyze various types of historical documents in constructing an essay that responded to the tasks required by the question. Student responses were assessed on the extent to which they met six requirements specified in the core scoring guidelines. Students who exceeded these requirements could then earn up to three additional points in the expanded core, based on a holistic assessment of the essay.

This particular DBQ asked students to analyze changing conceptions of French national identity and culture in the period since 1960. Students were provided with 11 documents (two of which were images) on which to base their responses. They were also given, as historical background, statements about France's entry into the global economy after World War II and France's increasing rate of immigration, mostly from former French colonies, beginning in the 1960s.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.98 out of a possible 9.

Students performed well on this question. They were generally able to understand the documents and discuss them appropriately. If students were able to grasp the need to address multiple changing conceptions of French national identity and culture, they could craft thoughtful, successful essays on the basis of an analysis of the documents provided. Many could not articulate a thesis that was fully responsive to the tasks required by the question until the concluding paragraph, so the best theses were frequently found at the end rather than the start of the essay. The clear topics presented in the documents (which included, among others, anti-immigration/anti-foreign sentiment, the consideration of language as an

expression of culture, the debate over the need to preserve French traditions, and the creation of a new, hybrid French national identity) allowed students to create three separate groups with relative ease, and the distinctive perspectives implicit in the documents provided students with ample opportunities to conduct point-of-view analysis. “French national identity and culture” were often conflated by students, which was allowable according to the scoring standards.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students had difficulty addressing changing conceptions of French national identity and culture. They omitted that requirement in the thesis and/or the body of the essay by listing and/or describing conceptions but failing to discuss how they changed since 1960. Other students erred in attempting to demonstrate change by creating an artificial chronological trajectory, saying, for example, that from 1960 through the 1980s there was great anti-American and anti-immigrant sentiment, but by the 2000s all of the French willingly accepted and embraced foreign cultural influence.

Rather than restate the prompt in attempting to create a thesis, students frequently sought to repurpose the historical background accompanying this question as a thesis. Without additional consideration of change since 1960, however, this was insufficient in terms of earning credit for a thesis. Students mistakenly focused exclusively on the impact of immigration on France, thus failing to analyze, in an explicit fashion, multiple conceptions of French identity and culture. Students also commonly described/summarized documents rather than analyzing them, meaning that their attempts to respond to all elements of the question were incomplete.

Documents 3 (Lang’s speech to the United Nations), 6 (Toubon’s discussion of the Toubon Law), and 7 (d’Ormesson’s opposition to the Toubon Law) were the most commonly misinterpreted. The rhetorical questions posed in documents 3 and 7 seemed to confuse some students as to the positions taken by Lang and d’Ormesson.

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 that the DBQ requires students to develop a thesis that responds clearly and explicitly to all parts of the question (students frequently provided theses that failed to address all tasks required by this question) and to read both the questions and the documents carefully. Teachers should also continue to train students to provide significant point-of-view analysis and to analyze, rather than describe or summarize, the documents to support the thesis in the body of the essay. Students should also be instructed to consider continuity and change as a method of grappling productively with questions concerning time.

Question 2

Analyze the ways in which Napoleon Bonaparte both supported and undermined the main goals of the French Revolution during his rule of France (1799–1815).

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to complete two specific tasks: 1) identify and explain the ways Napoleon Bonaparte supported specific goals of the French Revolution during his rule and 2) identify and explain the ways Napoleon Bonaparte undermined specific goals of the French Revolution during his rule. Students were expected to show: a) an understanding of the main goals of the French Revolution, b) knowledge of Napoleon’s rule, c) how his actions and policies supported the main goals of the French Revolution, and d) how his actions and policies undermined the main goals of the French Revolution.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.76 out of a possible 9.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students exhibited errors and did not include sufficient support in two main areas: use and development of evidence and linking that evidence to the main goals of the French Revolution. Most commonly noted among readers, in terms of evidence, was that students tended to merely list evidence of support (e.g., Napoleonic Code) or undermining (e.g., becoming Emperor of the French) without development — which then made linking those pieces of evidence to a goal (or goals) of the French Revolution untenable for the writer. Or, students would conflate time periods of the early stages of the French Revolution with Napoleonic rule (for example, that Napoleon was involved in the Tennis Court Oath) or attribute Napoleonic goals with driving factors of the French Revolution (territorial expansion was often — incorrectly — cited). Perhaps even more common was misunderstanding evidence, or overstating evidence (that France wanted to be militaristic/proud of their nation; France enjoyed the glory that nationalism offered; or that nationalism was a distinct goal of the Revolution). Poorer scoring students also struggled with understanding the intent of the goals of the Revolution — suggesting that “liberty” referred only to freedom of speech, that “fraternity” referred to friendly camaraderie between French peoples, or that “equality” did not pertain to legal, class, or social status. Such a limited understanding of the French Revolution’s goals in turn limited the linkage of goals to appropriate evidence. The lowest scoring essays offered a biographical sketch of Napoleon’s rise to power rather than engaging with the tasks at hand.

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 the question is very well written and is readily accessible to students, one recommendation would be to work with students on crafting explicit and responsive thesis statements. A clear thesis that is explicit and fully responsive to the question — and one that has a specific analytic framework — is most often indicative of a successful essay overall. To craft such a thesis, encourage students to carefully read the question prompt so that they understand the task or tasks they must complete. Furthermore, students should be reminded that they must address all parts of the question prompt in their essay. Going forward, emphasize synthesis and historical continuity and change — military histories are of course important, for example, but focusing on what caused a battle and then the outcomes of said conflict can better inform students of historical change and impact.

Question 3

Analyze the ways in which the development of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s both reflected and departed from the ideas of Marxism.

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze ways in which the development of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s reflected the ideas of Marx or departed from them. In order to respond effectively students had to be able to identify some of Marx’s ideas (for example, class struggle, nationalized industry, planned economy, collective ownership, atheism, abolition of inheritance, international revolution, women’s rights, proletarian revolution after bourgeois revolution, evils of capitalism, egalitarianism) and show how Soviet policies reflected those ideas or departed from them. Students could not simply say that Marx was for equality, or for the working class.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.48 out of a possible 9.

Many students have a basic command of Marxist ideas. Linking them to Soviet policies in the appropriate time period was the challenge. Many students were able to show ways in which Soviet policies reflected Marxist ideas and departed from them, and this question generally read well. The most common pairing was Lenin's New Economic Policy departing from Marxist ideas and Stalin's Five-Year Plans reflecting them. Additionally, Stalin's totalitarian rule was frequently cited as a departure from Marxist ideas. There were some truly outstanding essays on this topic that showed a sophisticated understanding of both Marxist ideas and Soviet policies.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students didn't always focus on the question. They did not clearly identify Marxist ideas in the introduction and suggested policies that reflected or departed in their thesis. There was a lot of restatement. Some students spent too much time discussing Marx in detail without getting to Soviet policy. Conversely, others said a lot about Lenin or Stalin but did not discuss Marxist ideas. As always, responsiveness to the prompt is important.

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 instructions for essays, teachers need to address analytical thesis statements, the development of an argument, and organization (so that essays aren't just one or two big paragraphs). Teachers also need to prepare students for linking ideas to policies in ways that aren't always directly addressed in the textbook. Students need to be flexible, and prepared to combine what they have learned over the year in ways that go beyond the material that is included in the same chapter.

Question 4

Analyze the ways in which the formation of overseas colonial empires benefitted and harmed the interests of European states in the period 1850 – 1914.

What was the intent of this question?

The question was intended to assess students' ability to analyze the positive and negative impacts of overseas colonial empires (i.e., "new imperialism") on European states during the period between 1850 (after the Revolutions of 1848) and the onset of World War I.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.17 out of a possible 9.

Most students answered the question with accurate historical information and were able to relate imperialism to other developments in European history. Because the period is familiar to students, and generally covered during the second semester of later quarters of the academic year, they were often able to answer with a fair degree of specificity.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students neglected the time period and wrote essays about the Columbian exchange or included information from the decolonization period after WWII. The information included was often historically accurate, but outside the time period, so it did not advance the students' arguments. Some students wrote about benefits to the European states and harms to the colonized areas, and in this they failed to fully address the question. The successful discussion of harms to colonized areas brought the focus back to effects on the European states. For example, assertions made about the exploitation of indigenous people and how the revelation of that exploitation affected the standing/opinions/reputation of European state(s) was acceptable as a response because it brought harm to Europe, not just to the colonized peoples.

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?

Greater focus on the tasks stated in the prompt would help the students achieve more success.

Question 5

Analyze the ways in which the expansion of the market economy and new financial practices affected European society in the period 1450 to 1750.

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to have students relate economic and financial developments to changes in European society. The question called for students to examine with some specificity all three parts of the prompt. For the market economy and new financial practices, there are various concepts and terms that students were expected to know: joint-stock companies, nascent stock exchanges, developments in banking, the Price Revolution, proto-industrialization, the Agricultural Revolution, mercantilism, and new commodities that came through increased European contact with the rest of the world. The effects on society were vast and diverse but included the following: rise of a middle class, social mobility, urbanization, changes in marriage and family patterns as well as gender roles, the rise of a consumer culture, enclosures of communally held lands, and patronage of the arts.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.77 out of a possible 9.

This question was a little more difficult than the other FROs. In most textbooks, this material is spread across two, three, or even four different chapters, requiring students to assemble the material themselves. It is also likely that most teachers do not deal with this material all at once, or in this context. In addition, the prompt gives a little less guidance on what was expected unlike the other FROs, which included words or phrases such as "Renaissance," "Reformation," "French Revolution," or "imperialism."

What were common student errors or omissions?

A large number of students interpreted this as a European expansion/imperialism question. Although this may form part of a good response, it was only part. Many linked overseas expansion to mercantilism, which is, of course, correct, but then failed to link it to any broader impact on European society. Many others saw it as a state power question, most often again in terms of colonial empires and mercantilism. A number of essays went into some detail regarding the expanding market economy and new financial practices but were very general as to effects on society. Still more essays were very generic on the market economy and new financial practices, but relatively detailed regarding their effects.

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?

If the prompt asks students about “society,” they should be aware that they are being asked about more than politics and government, although of course these are part of society. We saw many responses that interpreted this as a state power/imperialism question. Although this can form part of a good answer, the question asked is actually broader than that. Students should be instructed to also pay close attention to the wording of the question. In this case, the core of the question is “effects” on European society. A number of students wrote essays on the expansion of market capitalism and new financial practices, with only the barest allusion to effects on society.

Question 6

Analyze the ways in which the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Reformation affected the culture of Europe in the period 1500 to 1700.

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to determine students’ understanding of historical causation. The question’s focus on the impact of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Reformation provided students with opportunities to demonstrate a wide and varied understanding of the specific cultural effects that these religious reform movements had on European society during the period 1500–1700. Cultural history encompasses a broad array of themes, including the development and diffusion of new ideas and practices in the arts, literature, science, politics, and popular culture. Students thus had a number of choices to make when deciding which specific cultural effects to analyze. For this question, effective analysis required an assessment of the changing nature and scale of those specific cultural effects over time. Students had to apply a vital form of historical reasoning — causation — to demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between religious changes and cultural developments in Europe in the period from 1500 to 1700.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.21 out of a possible 9.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Several common student errors and omissions were discerned while evaluating student essays. One concerned the difficulty a number of students had in remaining focused on the prompt as they related what they knew about the Protestant and Catholic Reformations. Ineffective and inconsistent organization occurred as a result and this tendency frequently limited students’ ability to demonstrate an understanding of the cultural effects brought about by these religious changes. Another common problem for students was neglecting to define the specific nature of the cultural effects they were asked to analyze. Overly generalized characterizations of cultural effects made it difficult to determine how well such students understood the causal relationship between religious changes and cultural effects. This lack of specificity meant many students encountered difficulty when trying to develop and sustain the analytical focus of their essay on what the prompt asked.

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 help students understand that historical causation entails the study of a distinct kind of process of change over time. In the case of this question, it was the causal relationship between religious

change and cultural effects from the period of the Reformation to the eve of the Enlightenment. The question also asked students to analyze this relationship, rather than simply describe or summarize it. Analysis requires students to focus primarily on explaining the “why” and “how” of historical change over time. For this question, the student’s knowledge of the two Reformations and European culture, broadly defined was necessary in order for students to specify the nature and scope of the cultural effects they sought to analyze. Once selected, establishing clear and effective linkages between specific causal factors and effects over time — explaining the “why” and “how” of historical phenomena — will result in improved student performance on the exam.

Question 7

Analyze the ways in which scientific and philosophical developments affected religion in Europe in the period 1600 to 1750.

What was the intent of this question?

This was a straightforward, mainstream, cause-and-effect question that asked students to analyze how the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment affected religion in the period from 1600 to 1750. The time period was important as it placed parameters and provided guidance for students. It also encouraged them to focus on the years after the 16th century, making it impossible for them to use evidence from the Wars of Religion and/or the Reformation.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.21 out of a possible 9.

This FRQ elicited the most student responses of all six questions with more than 51 percent of students choosing this question in the second group. Student responses on essays scoring 3 or higher were generally longer, supporting the notion that students had knowledge of the Scientific Revolution and/or Enlightenment.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some of the common errors had to do with students attempting to submit evidence from outside the time period (e.g., Protestant Reformation, Catholic Reformation, Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, and the theories of Sigmund Freud). Students could generally identify significant scientists from the Scientific Revolution (e.g., Galileo, Kepler, Brahe, and Newton). Copernicus, although not from the time period, was allowed as evidence when linked to heliocentric theory, which is relevant to the time period. Students could generally identify significant thinkers from the Enlightenment (e.g., Voltaire, Rousseau, Bacon, Descartes, and Locke). Where students struggled was linking/analyzing the scientists and/or philosophers and their “developments” to an effect on religion beyond a brief narrative.

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?

It is important that teachers provide opportunities for students to purposefully and explicitly examine cause/effect relationships when studying history. Often teachers approach the discipline chronologically (from one chapter to the next) and do not pause often enough to purposefully explore history from the macro perspective that cause/effect relationships require. These historical thinking skills not only help students see continuity/change over time but also the reasons for continuity/change. This purposeful “connecting of the dots” affords students a much deeper understanding of how the decisions and discoveries of people and societies shape our world.