



## Student Performance Q&A:

### 2015 AP® German Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP® German Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Jennifer Redmann of Franklin & Marshall College. 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 question?*

This task assessed writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students write a 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.

In this exam, within the theme of Beauty and Aesthetics (*Schönheit und Ästhetik*), students replied to an e-mail from Eva Maier, an architect with the firm Maier & Pricci. In her message, Eva Maier invites students to visit the firm's offices and learn more about the architects' work. Maier & Pricci specializes in the design of energy efficient school buildings using environmentally friendly materials. Their most recent project, the Grevestein School, was recently featured in a report in the media. In the e-mail, Eva Maier asks students to offer their ideas for how the design of schools could be improved and to describe their ideal school building (*Wie stellen Sie sich ein ideales Schulgebäude vor?*) She also asks students to let her know when they would like to visit the architects' offices. Students were to ask for more details about something in the message; possible topics included questions about the architectural firm, the firm's projects, or the upcoming visit.

##### *How well did students perform on this question?*

Students performed very well on Task 1, the E-mail Reply, which had a mean of 3.33 out of a possible score of 5, the highest of the four free-response tasks.

### *What were common student errors or omissions?*

The overview to the task (*Übersicht*) indicates that students are writing to Eva Maier because they are interested in the architect's profession and have asked to visit Ms. Maier's office. However, some students misunderstood the context of Ms. Maier's e-mail and responded as an adult seeking a job in the office rather than as a student with an interest in architecture. Another source of confusion was the media report about the Grevestein School mentioned in the e-mail; some students expressed an interest in creating a report rather than viewing a finished product. The e-mail's focus on school building design and green building practices gave most students ample opportunity for elaboration in their replies. Many students drew on their knowledge of environmental topics to describe the energy-efficient qualities of their ideal school building. Other students focused on the general characteristics of their ideal school, such as large classroom windows or ample green spaces. For the most part, students were readily able to address the question of when they should visit Ms. Maier's offices, but in some cases their responses were overly general or vague. Most students did understand that they were to use a formal register in the e-mail, but many e-mail replies featured pronoun shifts from the formal to informal you.

### *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 e-mail reply is primarily an interpersonal writing task, but it also requires skill in interpretive reading. Teachers should provide students with frequent opportunities to read and analyze e-mails before replying, drawing students' attention in particular to the functions and referents of personal pronouns. Since students have only 15 minutes to read and respond to the e-mail on the exam, it would also be helpful for teachers to set time limits for students to write practice e-mails. Students should write in a formal register and pay close attention to how register is reflected in pronouns and word choice, as well as in salutations and closings.

## **Task 2: Persuasive Essay**

### *What was the intent of this question?*

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.

In this exam, and within the theme of Global Challenges (*Globalisierung*), students wrote their persuasive essay in response to the question of whether it should be mandatory for bicyclists to wear helmets (*Sollte es für Radfahrer obligatorisch sein, einen Helm zu tragen?*) The print source (*Quellenmaterial 1*) argues against mandatory helmet use on several grounds. First, if bicyclists are required to wear helmets, many may choose not to ride their bicycles and would lose out on the health benefits of bicycling. The author of the article also notes that good infrastructure for bicyclists supports their safety far more than helmets, as one sees in the Netherlands. *Quellenmaterial 2*, a table, summarizes statistics from eight countries on the percentage of bicyclists who wear helmets, the percentage of trips taken by bicycle, and the number of bicycle fatalities for every billion miles traveled by bike. *Quellenmaterial 3*, the audio to which students listened twice, presented a viewpoint that contrasted with that of the print source. In the audio source, a surgeon argued for the importance of preventing serious head injuries in bicycle accidents by wearing a helmet.

### *How well did students perform on this question?*

Students performed well on Task 2, the Persuasive Essay, which had a mean of 3.04 out of a possible score of 5. The topic of biking and helmet use was accessible to students, and most were able to express an opinion on the question of whether bicycle helmet use should be mandatory.

### *What were common student errors or omissions?*

While students were generally able to offer an opinion on the topic of bike helmet use, not all students were able to comprehend and use the source material effectively. Many students cited only two of the three sources, and some students presented inaccurate information from the sources in their arguments, especially when drawing on source 2, the table. (This was not surprising, given that the table presented some seemingly counter-intuitive information, such as the fact that the U.S. has the highest percentage of helmet use, as well as the highest number of bicycle fatalities per billion bicycle miles traveled.) Some students missed the focus on mandatory helmet use and instead wrote essays about the pros and cons of bicycling in general. Students frequently summarized information from the sources instead of integrating source material in support of their own viewpoint. In general, however, the majority of students were able to relate to the question of bike helmet use in particular and transportation in general, leading to successful persuasive essay responses.

### *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 students to read the overview to each of the three sources (*Übersicht*) carefully before diving into the source itself, since the overview will often preview key terms and points of view found in the source. Students should learn to develop a clear outline for their essays before they begin writing. Although working on an outline during the exam may take time away from writing, a relatively short essay that is well organized and concisely argued will receive a higher score than a longer essay that is repetitive or rambling. Students should be encouraged to state their thesis (i.e., their answer to the question) early and draw on the source material to support that thesis, rather than begin with a summary of the sources.

Students can and should take advantage of words and phrases from the source material in building their arguments, but they should be reminded to use quotation marks if they are citing the sources verbatim. In general, students should use direct quotes sparingly, since paraphrasing source material is a better way to demonstrate their comprehension of the material than direct citations. It is critical that students cite the sources as they draw on them, and students should feel free to use a short parenthetical citation form to save time. If students do not know the German translation for a particular English word, they should do their best to circumlocute rather than simply insert an English word. Finally, teachers should remind students that legible handwriting and correct punctuation, especially commas, contribute enormously to the readability of their essays.

## **Task 3: Conversation**

### *What was the intent of this question?*

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.

In this exam, within the theme of Contemporary Life (*Alltag*), the interlocutor (Mareike) opens the conversation by asking the student where he/she has been, since Mareike has been waiting for half an hour. After the student answers this question, in the second turn, Mareike goes on to tell him/her about a public discussion that evening on vegetarianism (*Sind Vegetarier bessere Menschen?*) and invites the student to go with her. The student is instructed to respond positively to the invitation and ask for more details about the event. In the third turn, while Mareike looks up information about the event on her smartphone, she asks the student whether he/she could imagine being a vegetarian. The student is supposed to offer an opinion on this question and give some reasons for it. In the fourth turn, Mareike has learned that the discussion will start at 7 p.m. in the cultural center (*Kulturzentrum*) and asks the student if he/she knows where the cultural center is and how they should get there. After the student responds, in the final turn, Mareike asks if the student would like to do something after the lecture and if he/she has any ideas what they could do. The student is directed to answer the questions and say goodbye.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for Task 3, the Conversation, was 3.03 out of a possible score of 5. Students seemed to relate well to the topic of vegetarianism and the prospect of attending a discussion on that subject. Most students were able to participate appropriately in the conversation and to respond to the prompts as directed by the conversation overview.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

In general, students understood the situation, although some thought that Mareike was giving a lecture about vegetarianism (or they themselves were being asked to give a lecture). Because the title of the public discussion took the form of the question (Are vegetarians better people?), some students responded as if Mareike had posed that question to them. A few students didn't understand the word *Vegetarier* (vegetarians), even though the word was given in the task overview. Failure to adhere to the Conversation overview led some students to respond inappropriately to Mareike's questions and statements. In turns in which the overview directed students to do two things (such as "respond positively" and "ask for details"), some students elaborated so much on the first topic that they failed to address the second. The opening turn in the conversation proved challenging for some students, since the conversation did not begin with a greeting, but rather with a question (Where have you been? I've been waiting for you for half an hour!).

### ***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 reminded to read the task overview, since it may contain words and phrases (such as *Vegetarier*) that are relevant to the task itself. Students should actively learn the vocabulary items typically used in the conversation overview — both the meanings of the words (such as *positiv reagieren* or *sich verabschieden*) and the phrases that one would use to give an opinion, say goodbye, and so on. In practicing the conversation, teachers should remind students to adhere to the overview and to avoid taking the conversation in a different direction, since that would undercut their ability to maintain the exchange with appropriate responses. Students should be encouraged to elaborate within their responses and say as much as they can during the 20-second time frame. This is especially important when the interlocutor poses a yes-or-no question; students should do more than simply reformulate the question as a statement. (For example: Do you have an idea? — Yes, I have an idea.) At the same time, students should avoid shifting topics or saying something that doesn't make sense within the context of the conversation.

The improvisational nature of the conversation lends itself to all kinds of role-playing in the classroom. From the earliest stages of the curriculum, teachers should provide students with opportunities to take on a role and practice responding appropriately in an unfamiliar situation. Within this context, students should learn words and phrases for opening and closing conversations, responding to questions, giving opinions, and dealing with complications.

#### **Task 4: Cultural Comparison**

##### *What was the intent of this question?*

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.

In this exam, within the theme of Families and Communities (*Familie und Gemeinschaft*), students were asked about the meaning of festivals and holidays in their communities (*Welche Bedeutung haben Feste und Feiertage für die Menschen in Ihrer Umgebung?*). In their oral presentations, students compared perspectives on this question in their home communities with those in a German-speaking region, and they were also invited to describe their own observations, experiences, or what they had learned in school.

##### *How well did students perform on this question?*

Of the four free-response tasks, Task 4, the Cultural Comparison, was the most challenging, which is borne out in the mean of 2.98 out of 5, the lowest mean of the four tasks. Students must give a two-minute oral presentation that compares two cultures based on their knowledge and experience of the German-speaking world. They must also recognize that their comparison is to be built around a specific topic, or prompt, rather than general in nature.

##### *What were common student errors or omissions?*

In general, students understood the topic of the presentation and were able to talk for two minutes about holidays and festivals in their own communities and in German-speaking cultures. Most students were able to list a number of holidays and festivals in both cultures, but many failed to address the *meaning* of holidays and festivals in their own culture and German-speaking culture, or they were unable to compare them in more than a superficial manner.

##### *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?*

When preparing for the Cultural Comparison, teachers should remind students that they must both address the topic *and* compare the two cultures. The prompt for the Cultural Comparison always takes the form of a question, and students must make an effort to answer that question in their presentations. The question may require students to address the meaning of a particular cultural phenomenon or the role that it plays in German-speaking and American societies. It is, therefore, important for students to practice describing aspects of culture in detail and depth. Students should be aware of the fact that they may focus on a single cultural phenomenon in their presentations, as long as they address both cultures and answer the question in the prompt.

Students may want to consider beginning their presentations by addressing the German-speaking culture in order to maximize their opportunity to demonstrate knowledge of the target culture. Since they will naturally have more to say about their own communities, discussing their own culture later in the presentation may help them avoid running out of time before they are able to make an effective comparison.

In their presentations, students should avoid vague generalities by giving concrete examples from a specific region or city in the German-speaking world with which they are familiar. Mentioning the source of their information (a literary text or news article, an exchange student, or their teacher) makes their statements more convincing and adds to the overall effectiveness of the presentation. Use of phrases such as "the Germans" can lead to overly broad generalizations and teachers should encourage students to use qualifiers such as "*some* Germans" or "*many* Germans" instead.

Students can develop strategies for organizing their presentations by learning appropriate phrases for opening and closing the presentation and for transitioning between topics. At the same time, it is important that students keep their organizational statements brief in order to maximize the amount of time they have to communicate information.